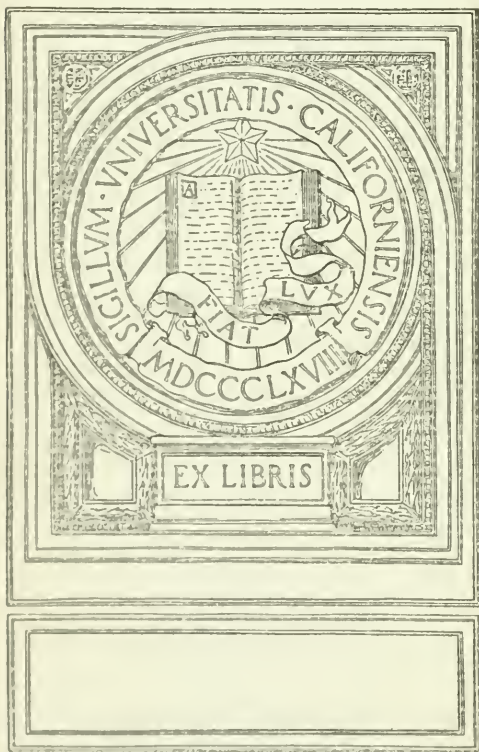




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THE BROOKES

OF

BRIDLEMEERE.

BY

G. J. WHYTE MELVILLE.

AUTHOR OF "THE GLADIATORS," "DIGBY GRANT," "THE INTERPRETER," "HOLMEY
HOUSE," "THE QUEEN'S MARIES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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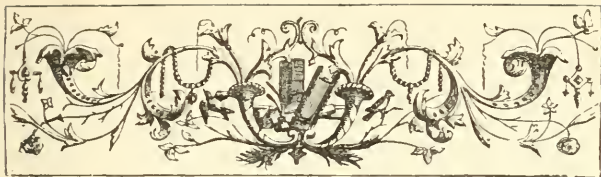
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THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE.

CHAPTER I.

AN ENGLISHWOMAN'S CASTLE.



AMONGST the many promises offered by the future, there is none to which people look forward with so much pleasure as to that condition they are pleased to term independence. With men the idea of this abnormal state is comprised either in the tenancy of a public-house, or the occupation and tillage of land, according to the means of the visionary independent; while with women the letting of lodgings alone would seem to satisfy a craving for self-government utterly opposed to the very conditions and peculiarities of their sex. Each of these pursuits appears to me especially influenced by circumstances beyond individual

control; but perhaps the last is, of all others, that which, necessitating considerable pliability of character, and implicit obedience to the whims of one's fellow-creatures, is therefore furthest of all removed from the impossible state of independence desired.

Miss Prince, showing fussy bachelors and suspicious matrons over a house near the Strand, of which she had recently purchased the lease and fixtures for a term of years, sometimes wished herself back again at Tollesdale, subject only to the caprices of Lady Waywarden, rather than the imperious summons of taxes, gas, and water-rates, the weekly impositions of tradesmen, the daily vexations of servants, and the hourly demands on time and patience exacted by the first and second floor. It was, to use her own words, "up early and down late now, and everything to see to with one's own eyes, and all the work of three stories to be got through by one pair of hands. As to servants! bless you, my dear, servants are worse than useless in a place like this; for cooking means waste; and cleaning-up, drunkenness; and even dusting is but another word for breaking everything within reach, right and left!"

In such a strain did Miss Prince then ease her mind, two or three times in an afternoon, while discussing the many drawbacks incidental to housekeeping, with her dear friend Mrs. George Stoney, that lady having brought herself and her whole family, present and prospective, to lodge with her old schoolmistress. It is only fair to say, however, that the little woman was, in her heart, as happy and as full of chirp as a canary in its cage. The sweetest bread is the hardest earned; the soundest sleep, that which is wrested from toil; and then what matter vexation, cares, annoyances, when we have got our real treasures about us? Miss Prince never wished herself back at Tollesdale for more than a minute at a time.

In the front attic was stowed away the poor paralytic sister, so serene, so contented, so happy! blessing God that her disease had but little affected the mind, and could not paralyse the soul. The back attic was a lumber-room, rich in accumulations of dust and litter, offering to orderly dispositions like Miss Prince's a hideous and revolting sight. In the bed-rooms were lodged, with great compressible skill, Mrs. George Stoney, her husband, and family; Jane, who had followed

their fortunes, sleeping out, as it is called, much against the advice and opinion of Dot. The drawing-rooms were occupied by a Scotch surgeon of no inconsiderable practice—an obliging but extremely troublesome lodger, as Miss Prince discovered when she had taken him in a week; eccentric in habits, irregular in hours, not averse to tobacco, and with a strong inclination for chemistry. Of late, indeed, he rented the back parlour, and had turned that small and gloomy apartment into a laboratory. Philip Stoney occupied the corresponding room in front; and where Miss Prince herself slept, and performed her toilet, remains to this day a mystery. Nevertheless, the little woman was always as precise in dress and prim in demeanour as if she still expected to meet Lord Waywarden at every turn. Time and absence had, moreover, in no way diminished her admiration for the character of that nobleman. A print from his portrait by Grant, on his favourite cob Ploughboy, hung in the parlour, and views of Tollesdale, from different points and at various elevations, adorned the drawing-rooms both front and back.

Miss Prince's gigantic heart was as adhesive as

an oyster. From its great size, too, and the small circle of her acquaintance, she had plenty of room in it to accommodate them all. It had taken in the whole family of the Stoneys; and, indeed, the greatest blessing to that little community, after all their reverses, was that they might be together. The ostensible object of their residence in London being that George, as well as his brother Philip, should obtain some mercantile employment, for which he was well qualified by habit and education. He had been, however, so shaken in health by his reverses, that both wife and brother persuaded him, though with difficulty, to rest awhile from all bodily and mental labour. To this end Philip brought every shilling of his own small earnings to the common stock; and these dribblets, with the modest portion of Mrs. Stoney, settled on herself, kept the family from the pressure of actual want. That lady came out with considerable energy under such trying circumstances. If her polysyllables were more frequent, and her manners more stately, than in prosperous days, the long words did not embarrass her activity, nor the queenly airs diminish aught of the diligence with which she bared her comely

arms to roll a pancake, and to beat up a pudding. "Woman's proper sphere is her home," Mrs. George would observe with great dignity several times in the day; "and no duties connected with that home, be it cottage, or be it castle (Dot, run and fetch me the dishcloth), can be too high for the meanest, or too low for the noblest of her sex! A genteel female, Miss Prince, as well you know, is a genteel female still, sitting at the head of her own table, or down on her knees, blacking her own grates."

Such sentiments, so entirely in accordance with her present feelings, and, as she fondly believed, the result of early tuition, sank gratefully on Miss Prince's ear. She had let the second floor to her old friends at a rent calculated to meet their resources, rather than to pay the interest on her own capital; and this arrangement was effected, moreover, with the most scrupulous consideration for their feelings; but the good little landlady never grudged her liberality for an instant. My own belief is that both the women were exceedingly happy under their privations. They worked hard; they bargained hard; they lived hard; they agreed in thinking their maid-of-all-work the

least efficient domestic of her kind. "An idle, saucy thing! with no more head than a pin!" was the form in which they worded their condemnation. They also esteemed a cup of tea, when the afternoon's work was accomplished, as the primary condition of health and chief luxury of life. That refreshment they imbibed together out of a little brown tea-pot in Philip's apartment, before he came home from business, and would please themselves over their refection by looking back to days of former splendour, far brighter than reality, as seen through the glowing medium of contrast and time.

To hear their talk you would have supposed them reduced peeresses at least—Lady Bountifuls in the country, Lady Patronesses in town, Lady Absolutes everywhere—bearing exile, privation, misfortune, with the courage and constancy of noble blood. After all, it amused them, and did nobody any harm.

George Stoney, too, seemed better in health since he had come to London. In Middlesworth everything reminded him too forcibly of his misfortune and the station from which he had fallen; but in the capital, where nobody knew him, and

he knew nobody, he relapsed with tolerable contentment into a mere unit of the throng. It seemed, too, that in London ruin was nothing unusual, nor was there any rarity in either making or losing a fortune. "A thousand openings," as Mrs. George said, "continually offered themselves in the City;" and so long as none of these were examined too closely, the way to wealth appeared delightfully easy and secure. George read the papers, took his early walk, lounged and rested, with the idea that he was merely looking about him to choose with caution the most eligible among all the very eligible modes in which a man of business habits and practical experience could employ his talents. In the meantime his health improved, and his fits of despondency became less distressing. His was one of the many dispositions, over-sensitive, and deficient in self-reliance, that can bear sorrow better than anxiety, to which the prospect of misfortune is far more terrible than misfortune itself. He was very happy, too, in the constant society of wife and children, especially Dot; and that young lady, delighting, as became her age and sex, in anything like change, flitted about him, and petted and worried him to his

heart's content, when she was not occupied on the staircase with a newer, and therefore more important, conquest.

I am concerned to state that, in the present phase of domestic affairs, and under the relaxed surveillance of Jane, a shocking flirtation had sprung up between Dot and the lodger of scientific tastes—a tall, uncouth personage, with red hair, freckled skin, and an inordinate fondness for children. This good-humoured ogre had served Her Majesty in no less distinguished a regiment than the Dancing Hussars, where his quaint manners and thorough-going honesty made him a favourite with the men in the hospital, as with the officers at the mess-table. Being a military surgeon, it is needless to observe that his tastes were both scientific and domestic, cherished all the more fondly that the conditions of his profession were especially antagonistic to study and repose. I am bound to admit, however, that his opinion of the healing art was somewhat derogatory, especially as regarded the skill required in its higher branches.

“A surgeon,” he would say, in the broad Scotch accent that fifteen years’ quizzing had been un-

able to modify—"a surgeon's just a wright, mon, or a joiner like. He can mend, but he canna mak'. He'll be none the worse o' gumption when the stretcher's laid. Wi' madicin', it's clean guess-work. I'll no' say but a docktor'll be whiles right. It's mair by gude luck than gude guidance, tho'."

With such sentiments, it was strange that Mr. Blair, as he was called, should have had any practice at all; and ladies certainly would have placed but little confidence in so plain-dealing a professor. To say, "My dear madam, there's nothing the matter with you. If you were to get up and clean the house, you would be quite well!" insures dismissal from attendance on a genteel invalid. Far better to prescribe excitement, tonics, change of scene, and good living; to forbid worry, opposition, agitation, or exposure to cold, and to lay all disorders of stomach, liver, lassitude, and discontent, upon sensitive fibres (whatever they may mean!), relaxation of nerves, and general want of tone in the whole system.

Mr. Blair, however, was a skilful operator, and the extraordinary strength of his long, bony, freckled fingers stood him in good stead where dexterous manipulation was required in wounds,

fractures, or such other local injuries as he contemptuously designated "just joiner's work!"

Dot, then, who had of late abandoned her favourite camel for a certain ill-used doll with a shock head of hair—which, although she lavished many beautiful epithets on it in private, was known in the family by the name of "Mumps"—during the rehearsal of some theatrical performance, hurled her Fetich from top to bottom of the staircase, narrowly missing the glass-lamp in the hall. Mumps pitched on her head, which broke short off at the neck, and Dot, though generally pitiless, was so moved by this unexpected decapitation that she forthwith began to cry. A door on the landing opened, a red head, with whiskers to match, protruded itself, and a long, freckled hand wandered over the curls and pinafore of the sobbing child, as gently as though she were some rare specimen of moth or butterfly whose beauty would crumble beneath its touch. Dot looked up, a little frightened, through her tears, but presently reassured by the kindly glance of the grey eyes, with their white lashes, pointed with mute eloquence to the doll's sad dismemberment, and wept afresh.

“Dinna greet, my bonnie bird! dinna greet!” said the tall Scotchman, examining the case with as much gravity as if Mumps had been a human subject. “Whisht, lassie, I’m saying! What for would ye mak’ a blether for the like o’ yon? See, now, I’m a joiner mysel’. Come away wi’ *me*, an’ I’ll just tak’ up the arteries, and tie the ligaments, and sort your wee bairnie for ye ’s good as new!”

Dot, in the keen perception of childhood, recognised that true sympathy which begins with assistance. She clasped the bony finger confidently in her own little fist, and looked up to the Scotchman’s face.

“Will it be Mumps, the same as before she was broke?” said the child, with vague misgivings that such a resurrection was too delightful to be real.

“Mumps, sure enough,” replied her new friend, ushering the little lady with great delight into his own apartments. “Hey, lassie! There’s a piece till ye. Sit *you* down, my woman, till I fit the auld head on the auld shouthers. Look, see what a canny bairn you’ve gotten noo that it’s minnie’s done greetin’!”

So Dot, accommodated with a slice of bread and marmalade, watched her host's operations with the greatest curiosity and delight, daubing her legs from his great arm-chair, smearing its leather cover, as well as her own face, with marmalade, and making herself in all respects completely at home.

After this introduction the pair were inseparable. When the surgeon came back from his practice, Dot, hearing his step in the hall, never failed to fly down-stairs for a romp with her friend—a romp so vigorous and of such duration as to incur Jane's grave displeasure when her charge returned hot, tumbled, dishevelled, breaking at intervals into unseemly mirth, and agitated by the hiccoughs, too surely consequent on over-indulgence in that agreeable emotion.

She had wonderful stories also to tell the family concerning her new admirer. Miraculous descriptions of his magic powers; his conjuring accomplishments; the instruments laid out on his shelves; and something, almost as big as Mumps, that he kept in a jar. She had even excited the curiosity of her father concerning this remarkable north-countryman, long before Mr. Blair, who was shy

modest, and retiring, though he *had* worn an hussar uniform, could bring himself to sustain an interview with any of his fellow-lodgers. Through the good offices of Miss Prince, however, an introduction was at length effected, and it was with no little pride that Dot, in a clean frock and hands, for the occasion, conducted her own particular friend up-stairs, and herself ushered him into the presence of her family on the second floor.

Philip, coming home from business, that evening was formally repudiated by the fickle young lady, who announced her approaching nuptials with "Good Blair," as she called him, in a tone of becoming solemnity. He could not but laugh at the gravity with which Dot administered consolation for his disappointment, assuring him that on her wedding trip, to "the place where the beasts are, like my Noah's Ark, if he would promise not to cry he should go there too."

He seldom laughed now. Philip had need of all his courage, and all his determination, to keep up his spirits in the routine of daily drudgery to which he seemed hopelessly tied for any length of time to come. There was labour required, clear-headedness, honesty, unremitting attention—all

the qualities that go to money-making, without the lure of prospective wealth. He felt he was but the horse in the mill, working round the weary circle only to secure his daily feed ; with speed to win a plate, and mettle to cross a country, yet hampered to the plodding, monotonous task that an ass, had it but the weight, could do as well. Philip did not complain—nay, he never even suffered himself to repine. Partly in the gladsome days that seemed so far off now, partly under the pressure of adversity and grievous disappointment, he had learnt the great lesson of life. He knew that it was well for man not to have the selection of his own lot. He believed that there might be good reasons for many things that were utterly beyond his own comprehension. He felt that three-score years and ten was but a miserable segment of the perfect circle that comprised existence. He had trained himself to think, as a soldier who takes his turn of guard-mounting or fatigue, the review before royalty, or the bivouac under fire, equably and indifferently, because they constitute alike the general principle which he calls duty. As a traveller, to whom it is of little import that the way should be here smoother,

there rougher, now in the scorching sun, then in the pelting shower, because it is but a day's work after all, and home is so near at hand. He could think of Helen, and the dream that had never quite seemed a possibility, without bitterness, almost without regret. It was something to know of what his nature *was* capable, had circumstances been different. He could even trust himself to dwell on the pale, stately beauty that constituted his ideal of womanhood, and feared not to recall looks and tones and kind words spoken, because, as he insisted to himself, Miss Brooke was only a memory now. A memory indeed! I should like to hear some casuist define the difference between a memory and a reality. Substance and shadow can never be very far apart. Philip's hopeless attachment, like all others so called, had a considerable leaven of indefinite hope at its very core.

To be sure, he didn't know everything, and it was lucky for him that he did not.

Going constantly to business, through the most crowded thoroughfares of London, this young man could not of course take note of the countenance or figure of every passenger he shouldered on the

pavement. It is easy enough to pass a familiar friend without recognition in the City. Thus it happened that Philip Stoney was unaware of the impression made by his presence on a shabbily dressed and altogether disreputable looking vagabond who slunk along behind him one sunshiny morning for a considerable distance, avoiding as much as possible the observation of No. 76, on duty in the Strand. This person had shrunk from meeting Philip's eye when he came face to face with him, starting, indeed, and changing countenance with considerable embarrassment, but turning round directly the latter had passed, and following on his track, now almost overtaking him, and again lingering in the rear, as if wishing, yet fearing to be recognised. Such was indeed the case. Though Philip's face brought back to him all of his life that he had the smallest pleasure in recalling; though Stoney Brothers, and especially the younger, were the only people, save one, for whom he had the slightest feeling of gratitude or affection, he dared not go up to the man he considered his benefactor, and accost him as a friend. Jem Batters had escaped from the burning of the brewery with life, which he some-

times thought was more than he deserved. The fire had originated in his own habits of drunkenness, for when left in charge of the building he had neglected the very duty he was especially placed there to fulfil, had sunk into the sodden, stupid sleep of intoxication, only waking to find himself bewildered, and not half sobered, amongst the flames. Maddened by surprise and terror, he had rushed into the street and fled to the open country for his life. He never stopped nor recovered his senses till the glare on the horizon half a dozen miles off denoted that he was at least clear of immediate danger, and then mingled feelings of shame, remorse, and apprehension that he might be suspected as an incendiary, prevented his returning to his home, and made him leave Middlesworth and its neighbourhood, as he phrased it, "for good and all."

A man so circumstanced almost always goes to London. Jem Batters turned up in the metropolis with no better recommendation than his own unprepossessing appearance, and it is needless to say that anything like an honest career was closed to him from the first. A garret in a low neighbourhood became his home; occasional—using the term,

in contradistinction to *professional*—thieves were his associates ; and dog-dealing, which comprised also dog-stealing, supplied him with the means of procuring a little food and a good deal of gin and beer.

Nevertheless, demoralized, brutalized as he was, the man could not see Philip without experiencing a revulsion of feeling that prompted him to take his benefactor by the hand, entreat forgiveness, and implore help into the path of honesty once more. The very look of Philip's back and a certain shooting-coat he remembered well, was like a puff of the free Bridlemere breezes that used to cool his forehead so gratefully far away down there in the fresh smiling country at home. He could fancy he saw the white cottage with its heavy thatch, and its low, snug porch, the little garden, the pigsty, the row of pea-sticks, the linen on the thorn fence, and his mother watching for him in the lane, shading her eyes with her hand. He was going to his work once more in the dull, grey mornings, with spade on shoulder and pipe in mouth, young, strong, healthy, above all, honest, and afraid of no man. He wondered now that he could ever have been discontented with his lot.

Ay, if he had but minded what mother told him, he would not have been to-day skulking about the close, narrow streets of London, so far from his parish, so far from home, so far from her. The last thought goaded him to overtake Mr. Stoney, and ask if the "old woman," as he would have called her, were still alive; but his heart failed him when he thought of the young man's clear eyes and bold manly face. "Dash it!" said he, "a chap's good for nothing till he's had his drain," and so speaking turned aside into one of the many gin-shops abounding in that part of London.

It was full, even in the morning. Two or three men, who looked as if they had been up all night, and indeed every night for a week, thronged the door; a woman leading a child was coming out, another carrying a baby going in. A short, white-faced, broad-shouldered man, in a fur cap and dirty shirt sleeves, was serving half a dozen customers as fast as they slapped their halfpence down on the counter; but nobody seemed to dwell over the pernicious luxury, nor to connect with its consumption any idea of conviviality or good-fellowship. It was served, as it seemed, grudgingly; tossed off greedily; and, if one might judge by the craving

expression of the wistful eyes, forgotten as soon as drank. Jem groped in his pocket for the coppers required, turned his dram off at one go-down, felt its fiery influence give temporary warmth to his heart and steadiness to his nerves, wiped his lips, ran out into the street again, and found of course that Philip had disappeared amongst the crowd, and was gone.

He must return home now—home, as usual, at this time of the day; but the sight of his old employer had unsettled him, and Jem Batters began at last to take serious thought of the position he had voluntarily accepted, and the probable termination of his career. Even the gin so lately swallowed did not afford him the usual anodyne. As he dragged himself heavily up the filthy wooden staircase that led to his den—for it could hardly be called a room—something of that sad home-sickness took possession of him which afflicts the mountaineer when he has been absent from his native hills beyond a certain time. The countryman felt he was pining—actually *pinning* for his heavy shoes, his smock-frock, his spade, his pickaxe, his old familiar tools. He longed for the very snort of the plough-horses,

the tinkle of the bell-wether, the muck and mire of the farm-yard. His vigour sapped by the polluted atmosphere in which he lived, his nerves shattered by alcohol and tobacco, I believe that if he had heard a cow low in the street he must have burst into tears.

“Come,” said Jem, sitting down on the dirty floor, and looking wildly about him, “this won’t do—this won’t. I ain’t agoin’ to have the horrors, surely—not this turn. Dash it! if I’d ere a copper left, I’d get out of this, and go for a three.”

The price, however, of that stimulant, viz., a threepenny measure of gin, not being available, he was compelled to satisfy himself for the present with a smoke; so he filled a pipe, with strong, acrid tobacco, and propping his back against the wall, because chair and bedstead had long ago found their way to the pawnbrokers, proceeded, with considerable dissatisfaction, to survey his present home.

I can scarcely hope to convey to any but a clerical reader, or one whose kindly sympathies have led him to visit the dwellings of the London poor, even a vague idea of the lair for which Jem

Batters had exchanged his cottage in the green lane at Bridlemere. So true is it that half the world does not know how the other half lives. Our great metropolis contains the richest and the poorest inhabitants on earth. It would be very good for both to see something more of each other. A man goes to his turtle at eight with none the less appetite that he has supplied a starving family with bread at noon. A woman's beauty loses none of its freshness for opera, ball, and concert, that she has sat by the sick, read the Bible to the blind, or stretched a gentle hand to raise the fallen, before she made her toilet for the world. It is something to be associated, however humbly, with One who is especially the Friend of the friendless; and those who seek, like the Persian king, for a new pleasure, should not despair of finding it till they have tried the recreation of doing good. I am not going to enter upon the question of how far people are justified in spending money on articles of luxury and ostentation: such a subject would involve much splitting of straws in its discussion, and trespasses, moreover, on the domain of political economy. If the rich had fewer follies, the poor,

at least temporarily, would have less employment. Pending the discovery of Utopia, we must accept our own world as we find it ; still nobody need be the least afraid but that opportunities will arise in plenty every day for the exercise of Christian charity, and the indulgence of their best and holiest feelings, without apprehension lest almsgiving should interfere with the rights of labour, or the impostor's mouth be filled with the bread of an honest man.

The room, then, which, out of doors, Jem Batters designated by the imposing title of "his place," was low, gloomy and ill-ventilated. The walls were blotched and stained with damp, the floor with filth. A close atmosphere, reeking with a variety of unsavoury odours, seemed to have been imprisoned here for weeks, unfreshened even by such air as was to be had without. Jem, in his early cottage life, had long ago been taught to associate rheumatism with open windows, and cold with cleanliness. Nor was the small allowance of oxygen supplied consumed by the proprietor alone: several animals of different kinds occupied the apartment in common with its lord. They were chiefly of such descriptions as are

called by men of Jem's class, "fancy articles." A lop-eared rabbit squatted, grave and unwieldy, in a dilapidated hutch. Two ferrets wound their white bodies stealthily, like huge caterpillars, to their master's person, and crawled into his pocket. Rats of grim and venerable exterior, clustered in a wooden tenement, gnawed and splintered by their teeth. A squirrel was practising perpetual motion in its cage. The curiously British instinct that impels our countrymen to the pursuit of what they call sport—for which there is no corresponding term in any foreign language—was deeply ingrained in Jem's character, as in that of nine out of ten Britons throughout every class of society. This peculiar organization it is which leads my lord to breed a Derby winner; to cross the North Sea in his yacht that he may whip wild streams amongst the pines for Norwegian salmon; to scratch his lordly face, and imperil his noble neck over Northamptonshire ox-fences in the first flight with a pack of fox-hounds; which sends the colonel after the buffalo on the prairie, or wild hog in the Deccan, or the cruel tiger in the jungles of the Punjaub; which bids our squires slay partridges, our yeomen keep grey-

hounds, our village blacksmith set surreptitious trimmers in the forbidden mere; which makes our mechanics dog-fighters, and our peasants poachers; nay, which tempts the cozy London tradesman to sit patiently in a punt for hours, that he may take a prey from the bosom of the quiet Thames, spread like a sheet of silver under lovely Richmond Hill.

Jem Batters possessed this instinct to a considerable degree, and it induced him to appropriate other people's dogs in London, as it had tempted him to snare the squire's game at Bridlemere. He drew some incomprehensible distinction in his own mind between such pursuits and the actual purloining of money and silver spoons. I doubt if Jem considered himself virtually a thief, although he made a precarious living by stealing favourites from doating masters and mistresses, chiefly the latter, whose gratitude bestowed, as their affecting advertisements promised, large rewards on restitution of the missing treasure. He was often heard to boast that he did a good business in this, which he was pleased to term, "the fancy and toy-dog line."

To-day, however, he looked about him remorse-

ful, and disgusted with himself. The sight, as I have said, of Philip Stoney's back had worked a complete revulsion of feeling in this poor, friendless vagabond. Business, of course, must be attended to in the meantime; but still he resolved, come what might, if he watched at the same place every day for a week, he would have another look at the only face in London that reminded him of his boyhood and his mother, and, bad as they were, the better and happier days of the old life at home.



CHAPTER II.

A BROKEN REED.

LLL lay against the field! *Bar one!*"
"I'll lay against the field! *Bar one!*" Amongst the Babel of voices that rise from the seething turmoil of the ring on Middlesworth Race-course, this sentence is the oftenest repeated, and the most distinct. While the speculators who live by the Turf, from the great commission agent, never opening his mouth but in hundreds, to the "Welsher," offering the best price going in pounds, but missing, when confiding takers of the odds dream fondly they shall be paid, are jostling, elbowing, crushing, and, so to speak, *eating* one another; above the roar, and the swarm, and the confusion, still the noisy exception predominates—" *Bar one!*"

That "*one*" is Benedict, the pick of the prophets, the pride of the stable, the "good thing" of the forthcoming year.

See! the numbers are up. What a field of horses! Three-and-twenty going for the great event! and from close-packed carriages, from densely crowded stand—from dark, serried masses lining the course in long perspective, far away, even to the outskirts of the town, thousands of upturned faces are watching eagerly for the "favourite;" thousands of voices asking in every tone, from shout of careless glee to whisper of hoarse emotion, "Which is Benedict?"

Here he comes! Striding down the straight, like a steam-engine, hard held, going within himself—strong, easy, level, regular as clock-work; his skin satin, his muscles steel, his crest iron. There is even a grim smile on Sam Waster's pale face, as he steadies him deftly to his hand, feet slightly forward. elbows in, the silken jacket inflated, fluttering, and the dirt flying behind him in the faces of his competitors. Sam has taken off nine pounds of weight to ride this very race. He is on at five hundred to nothing; and if judgment, science, and horsemanship can land him, Sam

means to be first past the chair. There is no question about the horse running *straight* to-day!

Wedged in a corner of the stand, whence he could command the whole of the Race-course with his glasses, but, contrary to his custom, neither making the agreeable to the smartest of the ladies, nor conversing with the most influential of the men, Walter Brooke stood watching the favourite, paler, sterner, more reserved than his wont. He had shut his book up, left the ring, and ascended to this post of observation, that he might look on undisturbed, and abide the issue.

While the horses walked off towards the starting-post, a white-gloved hand was laid on his shoulder, and Multiple's pink face and black whiskers were at his ear. To do him justice, the money-lender had taken the trouble of penetrating the crowd to reach his friend, that he might give him a hint.

"They're making Bivouac a favourite down there," said he, nodding towards the betting enclosure, with his cunning smile. "I wish there mayn't be a screw loose with *our* horse. I've laid a good deal of my money off since I came."

“Bivouac can’t get near him at the weights,” answered Walter, turning still paler than before. “I shall stand every shilling!”

To-day must make or mar him; he knew that; besides, it was too late now for compunction or compromise. The flag was down, and they were off!

His hand shook so that he could hardly hold his glasses in their place. The distant race looked like the hues of a kaleidoscope, drawing rapidly out into a parti-coloured stripe. The man at Walter’s elbow voted the pace *merry*; the one behind him thought it *awful*; and a crusty old gentleman of great experience and pertinacity observed, “That fool Sam is making too much use of the favourite.” Nevertheless, Benedict, forcing the pace to suit himself, was two lengths ahead of everything, and full of running.

Walter’s knees shook now, and his whole frame felt unstrung. Success is sometimes, for the moment, more difficult to bear than defeat.

It seemed a good job, after all, that Lady Julia had refused him.

As the horses came in sight, a roar like that of a famished monster rose from the whole multitude

at once. Rushing straight to the spectators, it was difficult to tell who was in front. Already whips were going, and arms and legs urging horses to the loose irregular stride, that told their powers were spent. At the distance there were but three in the race, and one of these changed his leg and gave in, fifty yards from home.

Bivouac, by Vidette, was game as a fighting-cock. To use his trainer's expression, "he could stay for a week;" but he was a length behind the favourite, and his jockey had already got at him severely.

Opposite the stand, Benedict made something like a false step, though it was scarce perceptible to any one but his rider. Bivouac's nose was at Sam Waster's knee in the next stride.

None but the great jockey knew perhaps what had happened. He sat resolutely down for the famous set-to that had so often landed him a winner on the very post. His whip was out, his spurs were going, while every muscle of the wiry, pliant little athlete seemed to lend aim, and power, and energy, to the effort of his horse.

Bivouac crept up, inch by inch. To either rider, the other's horse seemed standing still; and the

roaring crowd, the close-packed stand, the rails, the booths, the telegraph shed, to be fleeting by them at the rate of forty miles an hour.

Walter's heart beat so fast he felt half suffocated ; and a chill sensation, beginning at the crown of his head, curdled all the blood in his body till it reached his heels ; the shouting, too, stupefied him as he heard the horses' names roared alternately by thousands of lungs, mingled with exclamations of "Capital race !" "What a rally !" "Look at Sam's set-to !" "By Jove ! it's a dead heat !"

Walter shut his glasses and put them in their case, "Beautifully ridden," he muttered ; "but we've had a squeak for it !" Then he swore one deep, deadly, bitter oath below his breath, and wiped the dried froth from the corners of his mouth, for Bivouac's number was up, and the favourite in the last stride had been beaten by a head !

As he went down the crowded staircase of the stand, he moved like a man in a dream. The Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil's party was before him ; and Lady Goneril turned round to shake hands with the good-looking young hussar. He had presence of mind to seem pleased, and to

observe, "How cold it was! and what a capital race!" But I think if her ladyship had known the very slight impression made on his senses by her gorgeous attire of dark blue velvet trimmed with swans'-down, she would have ascribed his indifference to the score of intense stupidity, and never been so civil to him again.

He didn't know he had seen her, when Multiple asked him the question later, as they drove home.

The money-lender, as usual, had not failed to make a pretty good day's work. "I was always a little doubtful about that leg," said he, while driving Walter up the Bridlemere avenue in his phaeton, after the races; "and you see the deep ground broke Benedict down, just as I feared it might. If I hadn't got home on Bivouac, I should have been in the hole as well as you."

The other did not answer; he had spoken but little during their drive, and then only on matters unconnected with the day's sport. It was obvious that he was *beat*, both morally and physically. He had scarcely enough of the common instinct of courage left to dissemble his pain. Multiple read his thoughts, and smiled in covert triumph; with the sister's promise given, and the brother completely

in his power, he felt the game was his own. He regretted only that he must go to London in an hour; that he could not even stay to dinner, and mark with cruel glee the constraint and misery of his affianced bride. Nevertheless, he had given Helen to understand that he should see her before he started, and he liked to think of her waiting his arrival, dressed for dinner thus early, that the enforced interview might be uninterrupted.

Miss Brooke looked very pale and sad, as she sat at the drawing-room window, to watch Frank Multiple and her brother drive up the avenue. Her heart, indeed, melted at the sight of Walter, and she knew she had never loved him so well as now, for was she not a woman?—and had she not sacrificed her hopes, her happiness, her self-respect, nay, her very existence for his sake? It seemed harder than usual to bear her fate to-night, for the day had been one of much discomfort and complaint with the Squire, nor had she been dismissed from attendance on him early enough to take her customary walk across the park, as far as a certain rising ground and clump of trees, for which she had of late contracted a great affection. It might have been a little galling that this daily pilgrim-

age was prevented by her early toilet. Now that she was dressed, and it was too late for walking, a soft, spring rain had begun to fall, bringing out, almost perceptibly, the teeming buds of the hawthorn, and the young, green leaves on the topmost branches of the elms. A fragrant air stole in at the open window, mingling with the scent of a few fresh-gathered violets. Something in the time, the place, the scene, seemed so suggestive to the longing, loving heart of all it had hoped, and lost, and suffered, that the large tears brimmed in Helen's eyelids, do what she would to keep them back, and fell slowly, one by one, upon her hands. There was a face that met her, whichever way she turned—a haunting face, with fond, reproachful eyes, that no power on earth could drive away. Not such a face as Multiple's, bright, confident, overbearing, assuming already, though his glance shunned hers, the port and demeanour of a master. Nor such a face as Walter's, haggard, contracted, desperate, prematurely wrinkled, as it seemed to her loving observation, since the morning, and wearing on its every feature, the deep-set marks of anxiety, and shame, and remorse.

There was no need to tell her what had hap-

pened. She knew too well that her brother had lost heavily, and that now more than ever must she interpose to save him who was powerless to save himself. If she had cherished any vague, uncertain hope that his success might, in some way or other, help her to a chance of freedom, this conviction seemed to cut away the last strand of rope to which she clung.

Walter soon went up-stairs to dress for dinner. Jack was already engaged in the same operation. Multiple's phaeton was waiting at the door to take him to the station, and there was no escape from one of those *tête-à-têtes* with her future lord, which she loathed and dreaded every day more and more, none the less as time slipped on, that she felt their engagement must be proclaimed, ratified, *kept!*

It required all her constancy, all her resignation, all her noble, self-sacrificing courage to realize this last contingency. It is not too much to say that she would have accepted as a blessing any misfortune to herself that might have interposed to save her from the fate she had elected to accept.

They were a "likely couple," as the upper-

housemaid thought, peeping into the drawing-room to set it to rights a little during the dressing hour, and retiring in great confusion when she found it thus occupied. She voted him "a splendid gentleman," with his strong-built figure, his brilliant colour, his black whiskers, his profusion of velvet and jewellery. Miss Brooke, indeed, was too pale for her taste, and "very 'aughty for so young a lady" (the housemaid herself was of the rosy, roystering pattern); "but she'd a 'andsome 'ead, in course, and carried it, no doubt, like a queen!"

It was erect enough now, for Multiple was leaning over her work-box, and affecting, as he sometimes chose to do, the playful confidence of an accepted lover. Strange he could not see how pained and distressed she was! Perhaps he did see it, and liked to mark the struggles of the wild bird in his hand.

"Helen!" said he, dwelling a little on the word, to watch her wince under that familiar appellation; "Helen, I am concerned about Walter. He has lost a large stake to-day, and I fear he has not the means to pay it up."

The dark eyes flashed defiance, and the blood

mounted to her brow at the insinuation; but it ebbed slowly back, and her head sank dejectedly when she remembered the real dishonour of which this man held the proofs. She ought to be thankful for any influence over him, of whatever nature, that could save her brother.

“It is as I feared,” she said, very sadly. “I saw it in his face when he came in. Perhaps it may be a lesson to him. Is it very much? More than we could make up amongst us?—I mean, Jack and I?”

She was evidently resolved to exclude *him* from participation in family affairs as long as she could; but he would not so understand her.

“Don’t distress yourself,” said he, placing his hand on hers, which lay beneath his touch, cold and passive as the hand in alabaster on the paper-weight by its side. “I have pulled men through worse scrapes than his; and we are all in one boat now, are we not, Helen?—though it’s still your fancy to keep it dark. Well, it’s lucky for Walter that we are. Lucky for him that he has a sister, and is soon to have a brother-in-law! It would have been awkward, wouldn’t it, if he’d fallen into any other hands than mine?”

Whenever he thought she was not sufficiently demonstrative in her submission, this was the generous manner in which he chose to twitch the rope round her neck. It never failed to succeed, as now.

"You are very good, Mr. Multiple—Frank, I mean," was her answer. "I am sure we are truly sensible of your kindness—truly grateful, and I, most of all!"

She spoke in a low, weary tone, as if forcing herself to say something she had got by rote. He was not quite satisfied yet.

"Of course—of course," he replied, impatiently. "I have no doubt you know the alternative, and appreciate my forbearance; and so you ought. But look you, Helen: I think I have a right to some consideration in this business, and you are hardly treating me on the square. At your earnest request, I gave you your own time; and, I must say, you have taken it to some purpose. If I am to assume the responsibilities of your family—and you alone know what serious responsibilities these are—I am surely entitled to be considered one of them. I must be off in five minutes to hit the train. Don't you think, Helen, as you object to

my doing so, you are bound to speak to your father yourself, when I am gone?"

This was a twitch at the rope that brought its poor, spirit-broken captive down on bended knees with a vengeance.

"Not to-night," pleaded Helen. "Not to-night. He was so much worse to-day; and, you know, the doctors say that any agitation, however pleased he was, of course; but that any agitation is so bad for him, and might bring on another fit. I promise not to delay an hour when he is better. There, I promise. Don't—*don't* worry me, please; I think I haven't been quite well all day."

She moved from the table at which they had been standing, and bent over some hot-house flowers by the window. He asked her to give him one of these, in a tone that implied request less than command, and she obeyed at once, selecting the choicest blossoms, and tying them up in a neat, business-like manner to form a *bouquet*. The nimble fingers did not tremble, nor the pale forehead flush, nor was there any of the assumed reluctance, the pretended refusal, the playful expostulation, that renders a gift of this sort precious both to giver and recipient.

He would let her off none of his dues. He made her pin the nosegay in his button-hole ; and while she stooped over it in the performance of this act of vassalage, both her brothers, ready dressed for dinner, entered the room.

Multiple, nothing daunted, slapped Walter on the shoulder, nodded a familiar farewell to Jack, hurried across the hall, jumped into his phaeton and drove off. The brothers looked in each other's faces with a blank astonishment that was sufficiently ludicrous. Then Walter broke out in a harsh, sarcastic laugh.

"Bravo, Nell!" said he. "That's your game, is it? Well, of all people in the world, you're the last I should have suspected would set her cap at Frank Multiple!"

It was too much. Notwithstanding his ill-humour, the accusation, spoken in a rough, brotherly tone, was not really meant to offend. But Helen's nerves had been overstrung all day: the last quarter of an hour had been spent under an ordeal, the pain of which could only be appreciated by a proud, sensitive and loving nature like hers, doing violence no less to its most cherished prejudices than its holiest affections;

and now, to hear the person for whose sake the sacrifice had been offered, the torture undergone, make a jest of her oblation, and attribute the victim's self-devotion to mere coquetry or worse, it was too much, too much, and Helen fairly broke down beneath the trial.

She did not answer, nor even look at him. She only hid her face in her handkerchief, and rushed up-stairs without a word.

Presently the brothers went to dinner by themselves, for her maid came in with a message, conveying "Miss Brooke's love; and she was tired, had got a headache, and did not mean to come down again to-night."

It was neither a hearty nor a lively repast. Walter spoke but little; busied himself profoundly in the mixing of his fish-sauce; pushed his plate away after every course with a gesture of dissatisfaction, and drank sherry as if it was water. While the servants were in the room Jack abstained from offering any remark, eating in silence, and with little appetite; but when the last dish had been handed, the last napkin flourished, the door closed for the last time, he resolved on making one determined effort to break through the reserve that

was gradually growing up between his younger brother and himself.

It was a mild, still evening; the windows were open, and the mellow globe of lamp-light, shining on the flowers and fruit that covered the table, increased the darkness of the black gulf without. A soft rain fell continuously, and pattering gently on the garden-walk, enhanced the silence that grew every minute more oppressive. It served Jack, however, with a means of breaking the spell.

"Mr. Multiple must have had a wet drive," said he, pushing the wine across to his brother, and trying to speak indifferently, though irritated at the mere mention of the man's name, even by himself. "I wonder he didn't go to town straight from Middlesworth! Somehow, that fellow is always hanging about here. I say, Walter, upon my soul, I sometimes think he tries to spoon our Nell!"

"Very likely," answered Walter, with a liberal gulp at the sherry. "Nelly might do worse. He's a rich chap, and not a bad fellow of his kind."

"He's not good enough for Nell!" replied Jack vehemently. "Not half good enough; and

never would be, if he had the Bank of England in his pocket. He's not a gentleman, Walter, I'm sure of it. I doubt very much if he is even an honest man!"

His brother winced, and the blood mounted in his cheek. "A gentleman!" he exclaimed. "What *is* a gentleman?—a poor devil who is expected to wear kid gloves and a good coat, and to pay for them out of twopence-halfpenny *per annum*. Thank your stars you're an eldest son, Jack! You can be a gentleman that way, and an honest man too—free, gratis, for nothing."

"I don't know that I have so much advantage over you, Walter," said Jack, a little sadly; "and I'm sure if I have, I'll share it with you, old boy, to the very uttermost. You and I, and Nell, you know, must hang together, whatever happens. The last thing I can remember our mother saying was, 'When you're a big boy, Jack, love your little brother and sister.' My little brother's as big as myself now, and twice as knowing; but that's no reason we shouldn't be as good brothers to-day as we were when I pitched into Mauley Major for licking you with a cricket-stump in the Lower Shooting-fields."

He spoke with affected gaiety, but his voice trembled a little in real emotion, and found its way, assisted by the sherry, to Walter's wild, hardened heart.

"You were always a good fellow, Jack," said the latter kindly. "By Jove! how that beast Mauley went down at the end of the second round. You cross-counteried him. I remember it as well as if it was yesterday. For the first twenty minutes, that was the best fight I ever saw in my life. After all, it was a very jolly time at dear old Eton—happier, I often think, than one has ever had since."

Perhaps the speaker considered this memorable battle, in which, as on many other occasions, his brother suffered severely for his sake, a chief ingredient in the jolly time alluded to so fondly. Be that as it may, there is no question but that, to use the young gentlemen's vernacular, it was "an out-and-out mill," won by sheer pluck and endurance on the part of Brooke, who was a year younger, an inch shorter, and half a stone lighter than his antagonist.

"We might all be very happy together now," proceeded Jack, a little dubiously, as though

venturing on dangerous ground, "if we had no secrets from each other. Come, Walter," he added, in a louder, franker voice, pushing the decanters over to his brother once more; "it's no use you and me beating about the bush. Why should we? You've lost a cracker again to-day. Got into a devil of a mess, I shouldn't wonder. Well, it's not the first time. Tell us all about it. If I can't help you, I can advise; if I can't advise, at least I can see you through it."

"I believe I may trust you," answered the other, filling his glass. "I'll tell you what it is, Jack. I *am* in a mess this time, and one that I don't see my way out of at all, just yet. You know, what with the regiment and my horses, and one thing and another, I've no end of expenses that it's quite impossible to meet with the governor's allowance—quite impossible!"

"Yes, I know that," said Jack, who had, indeed, sufficient reasons of his own for a conviction of the fact.

"Well, of course," resumed the other, with a certain vague dignity that he had often found impressive on similar occasions, "I can't live quietly down here, as you do; nor would I, if I could. I

must hold a certain position, and go to a certain extent into the world. This entails expense. Ready money must be got, by hook or by crook. Jack, I've been driven to the very utmost shifts—by Jove, sir, shifts I don't like mentioning even to you—for raising the wind, so as to keep me going during the last three months."

Jack turned pale: he dreaded what was to come next. Walter, too, had drank sherry enough to resolve he would make a clean breast of it once for all. He paused a moment, threw a biscuit to Tatters, dozing on the rug, and proceeded—

"Nothing but the heaviest pressure, Jack, would have induced me to be such a fool. You can have no idea what I endured before I could bring myself to—to compromise my own character so deeply. I had been floored at everything I touched. Such luck at whist would have broken Rothschild. I give you my word, I played three rubbers one night at Mexico's without holding a trump—not a single trump—and a partner most of the time who could only have played the game he did from inebriety, acting on confirmed softness of the brain. Then, you know, I lost three hundred slap in that cursed water-meadow with poor Fugleman. The

horse was as good as a bank-note. In short, altogether, I was in such a mess that I went to a friend, and—I may as well out with it at once, Jack—I got him to back a bill for me at three months, for three hundred pounds.”

Jack drew a long breath, immensely relieved. “Thank God!” said he, “it’s nothing dishonourable! Walter, upon my word, you frightened me! I did not know what you were going to confess; and yet, I might have been sure of a Brooke,” he added proudly, and with a gesture that gave him for the moment a certain resemblance to Helen. “I suppose none of *our* name ever yet did or thought a shady thing in their lives.”

The interruption recalled Walter to himself: his worse self—that is to say, cold, calculating, unfeeling, impervious to those softer and more generous emotions which had almost overmastered him for the moment—with a readiness of resource and quick perception of expedients, habitual to him, the result, perhaps, not more of natural character than of the games of combined chance, skill, and calculation, to which his habits of life had trained him, he saw the possibility, even now,

of using Jack's affection to extricate him from the most pressing of his difficulties. If one of these bills could be taken up and got back into his own hands, he need be less apprehensive that his fraud might be discovered, and, indeed, he would gain time to provide for the renewal, if not liquidation, of the other, which would be the only document likely to appear. He knew Jack well enough to be sure he would never dream of comparing notes with Rags, and, indeed, would consider the whole matter too sacred to breathe a syllable about it to any living soul—Jack was so safe, so loyal; Jack was such an honourable fellow! When he thought of his brother's exclamation, he wondered how he could have been such a fool as ever to contemplate the avowal he was so near making a few minutes ago. It was folly to show your hand till the game was played out; and that culprit richly deserved sentence who pleaded guilty before his case had been tried.

Jack, in the meantime, was cogitating how he could get his brother out of his difficulties once again, and for the last time, without the possibility of their recurrence. He had done the same thing for Walter very often before, and, generous

as he was, had usually contented himself with but vague promises of amendment. Now, he thought, if he could obtain some pledge for future self-government, no sacrifice would be too costly to attain so desirable an object. Jack had not the money in his own possession, of course; indeed, our friend's available resources were seldom represented by paper, consisting generally of a few pieces of gold, and, towards quarter-day, even of silver. Nevertheless, he turned over in his own mind a thousand schemes for the furtherance of his plan, and determined at any rate to start for London early the following morning, and see what could be done. The first step, of course, was to ascertain what had become of the bill. Now Walter, in his familiarity with such methods of raising the wind, had been careful to keep the two bills separate as far as he could. For the second he had obtained cash, short of very considerable discount, at which even his accustomed stoicism complained loudly, from a person named Haman, of the Jewish persuasion; and more than the normal rapacity attributed by Christians to capitalists of that faith. From previous acquaintance with this gentleman's system of doing business, he

thought it extremely probable that his bill had long ago found its way into other hands; whereas, in Pounder's office he had equal reason to suppose that its companion would be forthcoming, at all events until the period had expired for which it was drawn; so when Jack, after an interval of deep reflection, asked him abruptly, "Which of the money-lending tribe had got him by the throat," he answered in a tone of becoming meekness and penitence—

"Well, I went to the most respectable man I could find—a person of the name of Pounder; not exactly a Jew, you know, but a fellow who does these sort of things for 'noblemen, gentlemen, heirs to entailed estates'—like you, Jack—and 'officers on full pay,' like me. He's a most respectable man, or I wouldn't have had anything to do with him in such a matter, of course."

"I'm glad to hear it," observed the elder brother, wondering what amount of roguery this conventional term "respectability" might be stretched to cover. "I should think the quality somewhat rare in his profession. What is the address of this respectable money-lender?"

"Pounder," answered the younger. "No Chris-

tian name, of course: these heathens never have. Mr. Pounder, No. 101, Short Street, Strand."

Jack repeated the address once or twice, so as to fix it in his mind, then he got up, walked round to his brother's chair, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Walter," said he, "I'll pull you through this. I can't quite see my way yet, but I'll pull you through. Don't let the thing bother you any more. I don't want to drive any bargain with you, old boy; you and I are much too good brothers for that; but Walter dear, it would make me very happy, and Nelly too, if you would leave off betting so much, and playing so high, and resolve not to raise money in this way any more—at least, without consulting me. Only promise me this, if you can keep your promise, and you shall never hear the subject mentioned again!"

The tears came into Walter's eyes, and he dashed them away with his hand. Even *his* heart was not proof against such kindness, and once more he was on the eve of a full confession; but Jack, who had observed the gesture, and who could not bear to witness his distress, bade him "Cheer up; there was nothing to be ashamed of. No great harm had

been done, after all ;” and the words fled back from his very lips. He dared not, he *could* not, acknowledge himself a swindler in the face of this loving brother, this honest, generous, high-minded friend.

“I promise,” said he, clasping Jack’s strong hand in both his own. “You’re too good to me. D—— it, old boy, I don’t deserve such a brother. I’m tired now—tired and beat, and not half up to the mark. Good-night, Jack, we’ll talk it over to-morrow, coolly and quietly, you know, without partiality, favour, or affection !”

So Walter, not entirely uninfluenced by his potations—for a man cannot drink a full-bodied brown sherry all dinner-time and for an hour or two at dessert, with the same impunity as second-growth claret at twenty-four shillings per dozen—took his candle and yawned his way up-stairs, not entirely dissatisfied with the turn matters had taken, and impressed with a vague, misty kind of persuasion, that Jack was a trump, and everything would turn out for the best in the end.

Tatters coiled on the rug, jumped up full of life and energy directly his master stirred. The latter rang the bell, proceeded to his own room at

the top of the house, threw himself into the worn arm-chair, with his eyes fixed on the French print, and loading the faithful short pipe, with Tatters (who had pattered up-stairs close at his heels) curled on his knee, began to lay his plans and smoke.

Judging by the amount of tobacco consumed in their elaboration, these must have involved considerable forethought. It was not till Jack had sat in the same position for more than two hours, during which the French print had completely lost its identity, and assumed a striking likeness to Lady Julia Treadwell, that he made the slightest movement, and then he started up, to the great discomfiture of his dog, and pulled a small, shabby portmanteau from under the bed.

No, Tatters! the gun-case is *not* forthcoming next, as on happier occasions, and it is no question now of a start in the early fogs of morning for the persecution of rabbits.

The terrier, with his head on one side, and a comical look of expostulation on his hairy visage, watched one article after another packed in the leathern receptacle, more and more dejectedly. Alas! they were all suggestive of decent in-doors

attire. My own belief is, that when the dog saw a civilized morning-coat laid at the top, he made up his mind for the worst, and resolved what to do. At any rate, he whined at the door, as was his custom when asking to be let out, and although Jack left it ajar in case he should return, disappeared in the dark passage, and was seen no more that night.

Next morning, however, soon after dawn, Jack walking sturdily into Middlesworth station, with his portmanteau on his shoulder—for he made himself thus independent of carriages and servants, not choosing to be cross-questioned as to his journey—was somewhat provoked, somewhat amused, and a good deal surprised, to find Tatters waiting at the booking-office. There was no resisting the dog's appeal, though he looked a little sheepish, as if afraid he had done wrong, while imploring at the same time not to be left behind; and Jack, who was always rather childish about Tatters, but who had of late become fonder of him than ever, bade his faithful little follower jump on his knee, and carried him off with him to London.

While the inseparable couple, chilled, sleepy,

and unbreakfasted, but consoled because together, were steaming away to the metropolis on his business, Walter lay snug and warm with closed curtains, at Bridlemere, dreaming that he stood in a pew at Lady Julia Treadwell's side, to be called in church ; but that hearing Bivouac was disqualified for the Great Middlesworth Handicap, and the stakes had been given to Benedict, Mrs. Major Shabracque stepped out from behind the organ, and forbade the banns.



CHAPTER III.

POUNCE COMMERCE.

JACK BROOKE, arriving in London, dropped his portmanteau at the station, and sallied forth on business, after a heavy breakfast, with Tatters at his heels. The dog was well accustomed to be left to his own guidance, and it is indeed only by thus trusting dumb animals that they acquire the sagacity at which, in our self-conceit, we marvel so condescendingly. The brute's intellect, like that of the man, increases largely by exercise, and the assumption of responsibility is equally conducive to the moral improvement of each. A dog in a string is a contemptible instance, arguing want of confidence on one side, and of loyalty on the other, that deserves to terminate in

secession ; whereas the franker nature that leaves its four-footed dependent to roam at will, and trusts to its attachment for a re-union, finds itself tracked through crowded streets and intricate paths, with the unerring fidelity of an instinct both above and below the reasoning faculties of man.

Tatters, following him through the confusion of Middlesworth on market-day, was as little likely to lose his master as his own skin, and, indeed, could have been deprived of either only by being forcibly caught up and held. Now, this was no easy matter to accomplish. The dog, unless he was quite sure of his man, had a way of keeping out of arm's length, and dodging off from beneath the grasp, extremely baffling to a stranger ; and if foiled, moreover, would have been no very desirable prize when captured. The black roof of his mouth, so much admired by Lady Julia, set off the whiteness of two formidable rows of teeth ; and Tatters, who would have scorned to turn tail on pole-cat, fox, or badger, was capable of inflicting very severe punishment on the human hand, nor would he have had the slightest scruple in tearing it to the best of his ability.

Jack entertained, therefore, no apprehension of losing his dog in London, and stalked along in perfect confidence that his friend would not leave his heels, Tatters plodding close behind him, ludicrously intent on the business he was about, and suffering himself to be in no way distracted by the remarks his rough-and-ready appearance called forth. These were more sincere than complimentary. The London passenger is seldom a good judge of terriers, and limits his profoundest criticisms to the paradox that "their beauty consists in their ugliness," so that the long coat, long body, long head, and short legs of Jack Brooke's favourite elicited more derision than applause. A *connoisseur* in the article, however, had scanned him approvingly from the other side of the street, so approvingly, indeed, as to resolve on cementing a further acquaintance with this desirable specimen. For that purpose he lounged along about ten paces off, feigning to be wholly engrossed in omnibuses, shop-windows, chimney-pots, and such objects as seemed to have no possible connection with a prize twelve inches high.

Jem Batters, still in ankle-jacks and shabby velveteen, with the red handkerchief, much frayed

and worn, knotted round his neck as of old, was patrolling the Strand, at the spot where he had once caught sight of Philip Stoney, in the vague hope of meeting that familiar face again. It had haunted Jem perseveringly of late, and the desire to learn news of home had acquired an irresistible force, which he accepted, in his ignorance, as a warning of some dreadful calamity to his mother or himself. Therefore, he watched and waited, day after day, at the same hour and place, missing Philip, whose time of attendance at his office varied according to the press of work, by about ten minutes, with the regularity of clock-work.

Such anxieties, however, could not be allowed to interfere with business. Jem noticed a "tidy sort of a dog" following a gentleman, and it was Jem's profession, therefore, to follow the dog. He had never seen Jack Brooke in a broadcloth coat and a London hat in his life, so did not recognise the young squire's back, nor, if he had, would it have made any difference in his proceedings. The dog, he had convinced himself, was a noble animal, provided by nature to be matched, mutilated, enticed, advertised for, and restored, according to his courage, breed, beauty, and the

value set upon him by his proprietor. So Tatters followed Jack, and Jem followed Tatters, till they turned into Short Street, and stopped at Mr. Pounder's door.

Now, on one side of the house in which the money-lenders were the sole inhabitants, stood the dwelling of Miss Prince, full to the very attics; and on the other an empty stationer's shop under repair, having a warehouse at the back, once a receptacle for unsold books, magazines, travels, biographies, novels like yours and mine, pamphlets on political questions of fleeting interest, and such literary lumber. This edifice, jutting out at right-angles from the rear of the premises, commanded the rooms on the ground-floor of the neighbouring houses on each side. It was the very place from which Pounder's back yard could be reached most readily; and Jem's experience taught him that it was quite probable his hairy quarry would be turned into that back yard for a space, whether his master was returning home, or only paying a visit to a friend. Everything favoured his plan: the workmen had "knocked off," as they called it, for half an hour to a neighbouring beer-shop, leaving nothing to

keep guard but a hundred of bricks,*a riddling-sieve with the bottom out, and a barrow full of lime. To be sure, there were only the walls to steal. Jem entered, therefore, unquestioned, ensconced himself in the warehouse, and watched patiently for his chance.

How it came, and what he saw, is perhaps better described from within than without.

Pounder was sitting at a piece of furniture, called by upholsterers a knee-hole table, in a dingy, dirty room, commanding a cheerless view of the back yard already mentioned. There were none of the usual appliances in this apartment that suggest the conveyance of money or property. None of the pigeon-holed drawers lettered down to Z, arguing business habits of nice arrangement and precision ; none of the green boxes, fireproof and padlocked, with names painted on them in large black capitals, scorning, as it would seem, to contain parchments of less importance than bonds, title-deeds, and such questionable materials for endless suits at equity and common law. No railed-in desk for the clerks, nor black arm-chair for the client, nor sheaves of uncut quills, nor bundles of papers tied with tape, nor drift of

letters on the writing-table, amongst which the visitor's own, appointing an interview, is always uppermost. Save Pounder's umbrella, there were not even the commonest articles of domestic use. Neither fender, fire-irons, nor coal-scuttle. All was bare, all was shabby, and all was dirty.

It was difficult to say for what purpose the room had been intended by the builder; perhaps for a bed-chamber, as a few steps led up to it from the level of the passage, and it opened into another smaller apartment, whence there was no further egress, and which could only have served to contain a bath or wardrobe, being lighted but by a bull's-eye in the partition wall, and therefore too dusky to dress, and too close to sleep in.

Although the place promised little of wealth in its aspects and arrangements, yet in the drawers of the knee-hole table, ink-stained and frayed as it looked, were locked away documents worth not only a round sum of money, but the peace and comfort of many a frank, genial, inconsiderate young heart; representing, perhaps, all the hopes of its Future, all the advantages of its Past. There were signatures in those recesses to bid mamma cry, and papa swear; to mulct younger brothers

and sisters of many a loose hundred not in settlement, that would have been very acceptable for the bride's *trousseau*, or the subaltern's promotion; to make a brave lad tremble, and an honourable one prevaricate; to turn the merry, cheerful home of breakfast-time into a scene of reproach, and constraint, and humiliation, when the post came in.

Other rooms in the house were well and even gaudily furnished. The front parlour contained several original pictures of famous Dutch and Italian masters, painted with considerable felicity by a man in the Haymarket, any one of which could be spared at a moment's notice to accommodate a borrower, and replaced forthwith in a different style by the same hand. The drawing-room floor, besides its cracked mirrors, rejoiced in fanciful carving, handsome bronzes, and a heavy chandelier in a canvas bag. There were bedrooms, I believe, above this, but they had been long since dismantled and put away, having nothing but the bare bedsteads left, with store of moths and spiders, cobwebs for hangings; and for a carpet, dust two inches thick.

Notwithstanding the size of the house, however,

most of the business was conducted in this dingy back room, the greater portion of which Jem Batters, himself unseen, commanded from the post of observation he had taken up.

Pounder sat writing busily at the table. His large bald forehead, as he bent over his work, conveyed an impression of the utmost respectability and benevolence. There had been rain during the morning, and the garden at Balham was a fortnight earlier than last year. He was inclined, therefore, to look favourably on the world in general, and had experienced more difficulty than usual in hardening his heart to the business-standard required. Multiple, walking up and down the room, was immersed in some calculation with which he appeared a good deal dissatisfied. His cheeks were flushed, and he frowned in a manner that did not improve his beauty. He had stopped short in one of his turns, obviously for a burst of ill-humour, when Jack's ring at the door-bell vibrated through the house.

"Can't you go and see who it is?" exclaimed he angrily, while Pounder deliberately finished a sentence, and wiped his pen on his sleeve. "If it's Overdue, I won't see him!" he halloed after his

partner, who had disappeared down the passage. "And you may tell him so! He's played fast and loose with us long enough. I'll sell him up; I will, by heaven! as sure as he stands there. Get out! you brute. Halloa! Whose dog's this?"

Four pattering feet having made themselves distinctly heard on the oilcloth outside, now brought their rough little proprietor bodily into the room. Tatters, according to custom, preceded his master, whom Pounder was ushering with great obsequiousness into the office, and thus gave Multiple timely warning of the entrance of Jack Brooke.

Now, it was by no means the money-lender's cue to be known as such to those with whom he associated on terms of equality in general society. He chose to appear among them a gentleman of independent income—well-born, well-bred; a man of position, education, and taste. He liked them to wonder, "who the deuce Multiple was," knowing that, with the world, an object gains by mystery more than it loses by suspicion; but he had no wish that they should be able to identify him with the bill-discounting firm so generally consulted, and so universally abused. Above all, he was most

anxious that none of the Brooke family should learn the truth, at all events till he had become one of them, and even with a bosom friend like Walter he had been careful to attribute his thorough knowledge of money matters to high betting and large speculations on the Stock Exchange. To have confronted Jack Brooke, whom he felt thoroughly to distrust him, here of all places in the world, would have been destruction.

But Multiple had a quick eye, and recognised the dog in an instant. His first impression was that Walter had come up about the bills, till he heard the elder brother's voice outside the door, and he had just time to make a dive at his hat, and remove it, along with himself, into the other room, where he resolved to remain in hiding till the interview terminated; exulting the while that prudent, steady-going Jack Brooke was walking like other people into the toils, and that he should soon have the whole family in his power—the elder brother embarrassed, the younger dishonoured, and the sister compromised.

Whenever this man thought of Helen, something seemed to come over him that imparted a bitter, morbid pleasure to the very act of evil-

doing, as if it gratified him to think that the lower he himself fell the deeper would be the degradation to which he would drag her down. How fiercely he longed for that hour ! less like one who desires the guerdon of a warm attachment, than one who thirsts for the wild triumph of revenge. Though the image of Miss Brooke, filled his heart and brain, his was a sort of love turned, as it were, inside out, that very closely resembled the cruel instinct of hate.

However quick he might be though, in identifying Tatters, the dog's honest dislike, cherished with canine fidelity, seemed quicker still to recognise the presence of an enemy. He bounced about the room, barking furiously, and scratched hard at the door of communication between the two apartments. Jack Brooke, seating himself as desired, apologized to Pounder for the intrusion and ill-behaviour of his favourite.

“ He won't leave me for five minutes,” said Jack, with pardonable pride ; “ but he is a keen little brute after vermin, and hasn't learnt town manners yet. I'll answer for it, he winds a rat somewhere about now.”

Pounder winded a rat too, or thought he did ;

and resolved to draw cautiously up to his game. It consisted, he hoped, of a fresh, frank, inexperienced young gentleman, short of cash, rich in expectations, willing to make allowance for the tightness of the money market, and ready to do a post-obit on reasonable terms — say, three for one.

Motioning Jack to a chair, he seated himself at the knee-hole table, leaning his elbow thereon to balance a paper-cutter in his large, strong, clean hand. He had not yet mastered the visitor's name, therefore opened the conversation discreetly, with a remark upon the genial temperature, so unusual for the time of year. He sat opposite the little window of communication, through which he could observe his partner's anxious face.

Multiple was not quite easy about this unexpected arrival, for although it would have pleased him much to see the elder following the younger brother's example, still, like all men who lead a life of duplicity, and who feel themselves permanently in a false position, he mistrusted everything that was unexpected or unaccounted for.

Jack, fronting his new acquaintance, was agree-

ably surprised at the frank expression of countenance and respectable appearance, so different from what he expected. Any little awkwardness he may have betrayed at first, which Pounder set down to the usual embarrassment of a borrower, soon disappeared, and he entered on the business that brought him, in the most straightforward manner, without delay.

“I believe,” said he, abruptly, “your name is Pounder, a professional money-lender?”

The other looked hard at the bull’s-eye window for instructions, ere he delivered himself of the customary answer.

“The name is correct enough. Excuse me, sir, for observing that you are mistaken in our calling. We are but confidential advisers in matters of pecuniary difficulty. I will not deny that we occasionally make small advances to clients of position and character, on the usual terms.”

Jack was a little puzzled at so subtle a distinction; but went straight to the point.

“I am an eldest son,” said he. Mr. Pounder bowed low. “Heir to an entailed estate.” Mr. Pounder bowed lower. “Anything that passes between us is of course in the strictest confidence.”

Mr. Pounder bowed till his polished head was visible to the very crown. The action denoted sympathy, reverence, and incorruptible good faith.

“In the strictest confidence,” he repeated, with another glance over Jack’s head, to make sure his partner was watching, “and without exception taken to any unguarded expressions of remonstrance or friendly warning that may be called forth by our interest in our client’s welfare. Young men are apt to be incautious, imprudent, wilfully blind to their own interests. I have sustained abuse, sir, that you would hardly credit, and bad language that I will not pain you by repeating, in this very room, as a return for my earnest entreaties to misguided young gentlemen that they would take a little time and consideration before entailing ruin on their families and themselves. Your dog is very uneasy, sir, and I think there must be a rat somewhere about. We keep that recess locked, and our clerk, who is in the City, has mislaid the key, or we would soon unearth the intruder. I love a rat-hunt still, out of business hours, as well as a younger man.”

This frank admission was made to take Jack’s

attention off the subject they had been discussing. The visitor was shrewd enough to suspect Mr. Pounder's benevolent phrases, and the latter did not fail to observe his suspicion. Tatters, besides, was sniffing about the door of communication with an energy that it was impossible to ignore. Altogether, Pounder thought it best to establish the impossibility of searching the other room at once, so put his little romance of the key and his rat-catching predilections together, with a simplicity that set mistrust at defiance. He spoke the truth so far, that at Balham he would have joined in such a pursuit with the utmost glee; but here, like other mighty hunters, his game was man.

“Be quiet, Tatters!” said Jack, calling the dog beneath his chair, and repressing all outward demonstrations of excitement, save a stifled growl and an angry red eye. “We don't come for rat-catching, Mr. Pounder, or my little terrier here could make you open your eyes, if you care for that sort of thing. My business is of some importance, and, if you please, we will go into it at once. I am an eldest son, as I have already told you. My father is Mr. Brooke, of Bridle-

mere, near Middlesworth. Perhaps you may have heard the name before?"

Pounder's countenance brightened. He recognised the name at once; for he had bills at the moment almost beneath his hand, bearing that signature, of which his partner had never ceased to impress on him that he could not be too careful, and he knew the drawer of those bills by sight perfectly well. His professional keenness enabled him to trace a family likeness in his present visitor to the embarrassed young officer whom he had accommodated; and his professional instinct hinted the probability that the elder brother, the heir himself, had been recommended by the younger to the same fountain whence he drew his own precarious and costly supplies.

Visions came over him, enhanced by his visitor's appearance, of immediate necessities, inviolable secrecy, mutual convenience, and a heavy post-obit. Not only did Jack *look*, he thought, like an eldest son; but there was an air of simplicity about his dress, his manners, his square shoulders, his frank, weather-browed face, that argued honesty of purpose, liberality of character, general inexperience in borrowing, and unflinching deter-

mination to abide by any bargain he had once made, however injurious to himself. Here was a prize worth half a dozen such plausible, improvident, necessitous dandies as the brother—a prize that, judiciously handled, and skilfully captured, might, by a trifling annual outlay, become the making of the firm at his father's death. He looked benevolently interested and concerned.

“I can feel for a young man in difficulties,” said he, with a grave paternal air. “I have had much to contend with, Mr. Brooke (I think you said your name was Brooke); much to contend with in early life myself. Mine is a curious history, and shows how cautious a youth should be to borrow from respectable parties. At five-and-twenty years of age, sir, I had an opening in business that necessitated a small advance of capital. A few, a *very* few thousand pounds was demanded for a share in the excellent firm of which I am now proud to be senior partner. The matter was trifling enough; but I was a young man in those days, Mr. Brooke, and, I am sorry to admit, not a very steady one; I could not lay my hand on the sum required, small as it was, and what did I do? Consult some friend of experience and profes-

sional standing, to abide by his judgment. and act on his advice? Not a bit of it! I wanted the money. I was in a hurry for the money. I would *have* the money; and I went to an avowed money-lender, a regular bill-discounter, and obtained it, sir, upon terms that, even at this distance of time, I blush to recall. He must have made me pay not less than one hundred per cent.; one hundred per cent., as I sit here, for every shilling he advanced me before I had done with him. And I found out, when it was too late, that the firm itself would have lent me the money on far more liberal terms, trusting to my own undertaking for payment of capital and interest, by quarterly instalments out of my share in the annual profits. It was a lesson I shall never forget, Mr. Brooke, and I regret it the less that it taught me the caution I needed, and impressed on me in the strongest manner the liberality of our firm. It has always been our mode of doing business. I trust the same system may continue so long as I have the honour of conducting its affairs. Pardon me, Mr. Brooke, this is irrelevant—a little word of warning from an old man to a young one, of which the motive must excuse the impertinence—we will proceed to

your business, if you please, at once. Do you desire a temporary advance for immediate necessities? I observe, state the sum, and name your securities. Do you ask my advice as to the prudence of borrowing money in the abstract? I reply, emphatically, don't."

Multiple, watching at the window, and listening intently to this peroration, ground his teeth in anger and disgust. "The clumsy ass!" he muttered below his breath, "to try this affectation of honesty with a fellow that, he must see at a glance, is a really honest man. Not to know it's only fit to gull some fool, who is half a rogue already. Idiot! I wish he was up to his neck in his own cabbage-beds! I shouldn't be the least surprised if he blew the whole business to this blundering, straightforward, hard-headed young clodpole, and put us all in the hole before he has done."

He was in a very uncomfortable position. Closeted in a dusty little room, within ten feet of a critical job, the mismanagement of which he was compelled to witness without interference, because he was afraid to discover himself, Mr. Multiple's face grew darker and darker, and his blood tingled to his finger-ends.

Jack Brooke had listened attentively to the money-lender's tale, and its effect, as his partner foresaw, was the very reverse of what the narrator intended. The young Squire had mother-wit enough to detect a false ring in the assumed friendship and sincerity of his senior. Like a fencer who has yet to prove his adversary's strength, he paused a little ere he took up his ground cautiously out of distance, feeling the other's blade, as it were, with a very gentle and inquiring touch.

That other, strong in the maturity of experience and the confidence of daily stratagem, engaged boldly and without hesitation. The sooner his visitor's business was done, he thought, and the more effectually, the better. Attributing his silence to a natural diffidence in exposing his affairs, he leaned across the table, and renewed the conversation with great complacence.

"Would it be premature, Mr. Brooke, to suggest a short and general statement on paper, shall we say, of the advance you may require? We can meet your views probably in a variety of ways, any of which would suit our convenience equally well. A life-assurance; a bill at an earlier

or later date, indorsed, as a matter of form, by one other signature ; an undertaking for repayment, with accumulative interest, on the demise of certain parties. I throw these out as mere suggestions. Whatever you resolve, you can depend upon us, believe me, to consult your interests as carefully as our own."

"Stop a moment," said Jack, "you go fast, Mr. Pounder. I did not come here to borrow money ; at least, that was not my primary object."

"Glad to hear it, sir ; glad to hear it," replied Pounder, by no means unused to such declarations at the opening of proceedings. "If advice is all you require, you've come to the right shop for the article. And we make no charge for it, neither. No 'six-and-eightpennies' here, Mr. Brooke. Any information an old man can give a young one, you are welcome to from me for nothing."

Multiple's attention had been more than once arrested by the visitor's declaration. He knew his man, and was sure that what Jack Brooke said he meant. He listened painfully now, suspecting what was to come, and wishing he had trusted his partner more implicitly in the matter of the bills.

"I am not here as a borrower, Mr. Pounder," explained Jack, "so much as a purchaser; though it is quite possible I must be the former in order to become the latter. I wish to have no reserve, but to treat you with the confidence I expect in return. You are acquainted with my brother, Walter Brooke, a subaltern in the Dancing Hussars?"

Pounder glanced at the bull's-eye, and detecting no signal for a negative, affected to task his memory severely ere he replied—

"I think I have the name somewhere on my books. An agreeable, well-informed young gentleman, if I remember right. I am proud to make the acquaintance of his brother."

"He has been here not long ago," continued Jack, fixing his eyes on the other, "and borrowed three hundred pounds of you in this very room on a bill at three months."

"Three hundred pounds at three months," repeated Pounder, thoughtfully. "Very possibly, very possibly. You must allow me to refer back. I cannot carry these trifling matters in my head, but I am very scrupulous in my entries, very!"

To Multiple's extreme vexation, watching him

through the bull's-eye, he unlocked one of the drawers beneath his hand, and produced a file of papers, at the top of which was the bill in question, and its duplicate.

Wetting his thumb deliberately, he turned them slowly over, checking them off one by one all the way through and back again, till he returned to the document he wanted. Having thus gained a few moments, during which he ran over some complicated mental arithmetic, he laid two papers on the table before him, and observed—

“You are right, Mr. Brooke. Quite correct, sir. Here is the bill to which you allude. Ah! three months—three hundred. This, I presume, is your brother's signature; not very legible, but enough for the purpose, and indorsed by one De Rolle, a subaltern officer in the same regiment.”

“Mr. Pounder!” exclaimed Jack, eagerly, “I don't understand these things. I don't profess to be a man of business. That bill cannot, I suppose, be worth more than three hundred pounds at most. What shall I give you to take it away with me now, this moment? Name your own terms; I will engage to find means of paying the price!”

Pounder smiled blandly, well satisfied. It would, of course, be a good stroke of business to obtain the elder brother for a debtor rather than the younger.

In his own opinion, and he had considerable sagacity in such matters, Walter Brooke's paper was about the least valuable with which he was concerned. In the matter of solvency, he rated the hussar very little above Mr. Overdue, while here was a substitute offering himself eagerly, with "eldest son" written on every feature and apparent in every movement. He would have closed gladly with the offer after only the usual modest reluctance that wary old men, as well as prudent young women, think well to affect in accepting the fulfilment of their wishes, when catching sight of his partner's face at its post of observation, he was discomfited to perceive the strong expression of warning and disapproval it conveyed.

"Do I quite understand you, Mr. Brooke?" said he, fidgeting with the papers. "Is it your object to take up your brother's liabilities, or are you desirous of a further advance on your joint security?"

"I speak plain enough," answered Jack, shortly. "What I want is that bill of Walter Brooke now

lying beneath your hand. How much less than three hundred will you take for it *now*, at this moment? That point settled, we will consider how the sum can be raised on my personal security afterwards."

Multiple still telegraphed violently to refuse. Pounder was a good deal puzzled, not so much by the purchaser's anxiety, though that was sufficiently unaccountable, as by his partner's reluctance to dispose, on advantageous terms, of what they had both reason to believe would eventually prove a bad debt; and thinking to gain a little time, and perhaps elucidate the mystery, he observed quietly—

"There are two bills of Mr. Walter Brooke here in my possession; which of them do you propose to redeem?"

Multiple groaned in spirit. Slipping from the window, he stole softly to the door and held it ajar, uncertain how to act. Tatters, already sharply rebuked for interference, dared not remonstrate, but was obliged to content himself with a deep, angry, continuous growl beneath his master's chair.

The blood flushed to Jack's forehead. "Two of them!" said he. "How dy'e mean? I have

consulted Walter. I am in my brother's confidence. There must be something wrong here!"

"There must, indeed," answered Pounder, gravely, and not entirely without sympathy for the modest, guileless nature with which he had to deal. At Balham he would have gone into his cause, hand-over-head. Even here, in the office, he was sorry for him, though he meant to accommodate him with a post-obit just the same. "I fear there *must* be something wrong, Mr. Brooke. If you will keep your dog quiet, I will detail the circumstances as far as my memory serves me. I have the date of your brother's last visit in my day-book. Here it is. On that occasion I cashed for him one of these bills—the date of which is also entered—deducting the customary discount; a mere trifle for accommodation. Cast your eye down that column to the last date. On that day, sir, in the usual course of business, I became possessed of another bill of your brother for the same sum, indorsed by the same party, and except that it seems to have been drawn two days subsequently, an exact *fac-simile* of the previous one. You observe, therefore, that it would take six hundred pounds to cover the whole amount advanced to

Mr. Walter Brooke upon his own and his friend's security. Have you any reason to suspect, sir, that either of these documents can have been tampered with? To speak plain English, Mr. Brooke, this business is not entirely unlike a case of forgery."

Now, Pounder had his own reasons for thus desiring to elucidate the mystery that hung over these two bills. It was obvious that his partner knew something more about them than was apparent on the surface ; also, that he was strangely anxious to keep them both in his hands, as though their possession by another would compromise himself or some one in whom he was interested. Not in love alone is it a wise maxim to

" Trust me all in all, or not at all."

People in the same boat should row the same stroke if they would make way against the stream. Had Multiple told his partner candidly why he wished to hold these two documents *in terrorem* over Walter's head, Pounder would probably have laid himself out on his oar with his usual energy and perseverance. Now he was backing water when the other wanted him to pull. Nay, he was

not unwilling to discover something to his principal's prejudice that might serve as a set-off against the power which heavy pecuniary obligations, and a knowledge of one or two transactions not exactly sanctioned by the laws of the land, gave the latter over himself. This was why he hinted his suspicions of foul play to Jack, disregarding, as if it were not there, a white face at the door peering right into the room, working with suppressed anxiety, entreaty, and resentment, till its expression was truly diabolical.

On the mention of the two bills, where he only expected to find one, a horrible suspicion had glanced across Jack Brooke's mind. He reflected on his brother's manner both before and during the time of his confession at Bridlemere; on his obvious mental suffering for a considerable period; his restlessness; his irritability; his anxiety about trifles, so unlike his usual disposition; especially on the agitation he betrayed in making an avowal which, after all, admitted nothing more criminal than the common imprudence of raising money on a bill; and recalling these suspicious symptoms, he shuddered while he came to the conclusion that there was some gross fraud connected with this

transaction, of which his brother was cognizant, if, indeed, he had not been its originator. Pounder's last sentence drove the nail home to the quick. Jack collected all his energies, and held his breath while he thought what was best to be done. There was still one hope left—his brother's signature might have been imitated by some skilful forger. He was angry with himself that he could not feel thoroughly convinced this was the case.

"May I look at that bill?" he asked quietly, pointing to the uppermost of those which lay beneath Pounder's hand.

"Certainly," said the latter, turning his eyes purposely from the door, and spreading the document out on the table, but keeping hold of it at top and bottom with both strong hands the while.

Jack studied it minutely. He could have taken his oath to his brother's signature; with that of Ragman de Rolle he was not acquainted, but he examined it as critically as a detective or an expert. Not a dash nor a dot in that officer's bold, irregular handwriting escaped his observation. "Now the other," said he deliberately, having taken a good five minutes to peruse the first.

Before complying, Pounder locked the examined

bill carefully away in a drawer. This unexpected precaution did not escape the visitor's observation, and roused his suspicions to the utmost. Multiple breathed again.

Still keeping his hand on it, Pounder spread the second bill out under Jack's nose, who treated it like the first. Again there could be no doubt of his brother's handwriting. He could have sworn to it here also; but he turned pale when he examined the indorsement. Ragman de Rolle's name was written feebly, neatly, with far less boldness and freedom than on the other bill. Had he but been trusted with a full confession, Jack would not have suspected Walter of a heavier and more dangerous crime than he had really committed. The conviction of his younger brother's guilt went through the elder like a shot. He trembled—he turned pale. His features quivered from the shock. Then he rallied with the very peril of the crisis. Though a thousand thoughts of home, his father, Helen, Uncle Archie chased each other wildly through his brain, the one idea predominated over all, that Walter must be saved at any cost, at any sacrifice. If he could obtain possession of this bill his brother would at least be

free from the danger of detection. Time would be gained ; arrangements made ; a compromise effected ; but the bill he *must* have !

“I will take it up,” said he, affecting carelessness, though his voice trembled. “Hand it over. I can afford to pay for my fancy.”

He had resolved to accept any eventual loss, however ruinous, and would have proved, as Pounder’s instincts told him, an extremely valuable customer ; but the money-lender did not dare disobey his partner, and shook his head in mild deprecation.

“Not business, Mr. Brooke !” said he. “Excuse me ; not business. In matters of this kind I must consult the firm.”

Jack’s eye was on the bill—keen, glittering, vigilant—as it had rested in merrier days on some twisting cricket-ball when he kept the University wickets to professional bowling.

“I make you a liberal offer,” he urged. “Your own terms !”

“And I must decline it,” answered Pounder polite, but obviously determined.

He moved his hand as he spoke, probably with the intention of locking the coveted article out of

sight, but the practised wicket-keeper was too quick for him. Jack pounced at it like lightning, and effected a brilliant catch; still the money-lender's grasp, though a thought too late, fell like an iron fetter about his wrists, and he struggled in vain to shake them free.

"Stand off, man!" exclaimed Jack, his spirits rather than his temper rising with the encounter. "I WILL have it, I tell you! Upon my soul, I'll strike, if you don't let go!"

"Two can play at that game, Mr. Brooke," replied the other, not entirely without a fierce enjoyment of his own in the prospective "set-to." He was a powerful, muscular man, fond of exercise, and had not engaged in what he called "a breather" for years.

One or two heavy lurches, and the knee-hole table across which they wrestled came to the floor with a crash. Pounder's foot caught in it as it fell, and Jack was able to free his left hand, in which, however, he did *not* hold the bill. He was no less surprised than encouraged to find no alarm given by his antagonist; no cry for "Police!" no indication of assistance being within ear-shot. His hopes rose. He would get clear off with the

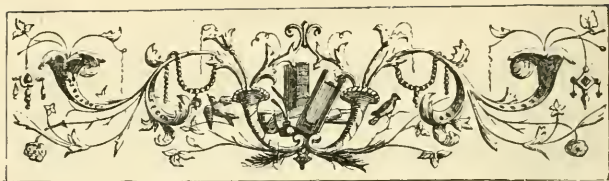
bill after all; but his blood was up, too, and he meant *real* fighting now if he was opposed. Both men breathed harder, fiercer, and their eyes were beginning to shine.

“Will you let go?” hissed out Jack, savagely, between his teeth, while he got his arm back to strike.

“Not if I know it!” replied Pounder, in a hoarse whisper, and these were the only words that passed.

There was a dull, heavy sound, and the money-lender reeled, and lost his footing. Struck just behind the temple, he felt his senses failing, and everything in a swim all round him. Nevertheless, he clung manfully to his adversary, who, with another blow, felt confident of getting clear off, prize and all. His hand was back to repeat it, when a crash resounded in his ears, a flare of yellow flame passed before his eyes, then came a dull, numbed tingling, a sickly sensation of repose on an inclined plane in the dark, and a vague, peevish consciousness of a familiar voice wandering about him, saying—

“I wouldn’t have believed they put such good horn into the handles of these cotton umbrellas!”



CHAPTER IV.

A BROKEN HEAD.



THE handle of a cotton umbrella, when the horn is really sound, may prove, on occasion, a very efficient weapon of offence. Jem Batters, amused, excited, intensely pleased, witnessed the whole skirmish from the post of observation he had so skilfully taken up. He saw Jack close with Pounder, and smiled in grim satisfaction at their "style," as he called it, when the men "took hold." He scarce repressed audible approval of the masterly manner with which the young Squire, whose face he recognised, delivered his left; and he *did* exclaim "Foul, foul," loud and distinct, when Multiple, white and scowling, stole in behind the successful combatant, and, glancing vainly

here and there for a weapon, seized his partner's umbrella to lay open a good four inches of Jack Brooke's head, dropping him prostrate and senseless at his feet. All this, I say, he saw to the best advantage; yet, perhaps, had the partners been aware they were thus overlooked, their consultation, hurried and frightened as it was, would have been more hurried and frightened still.

Multiple, though he affected a brutal carelessness while he praised the strength of the umbrella, looked down on his work a minute afterwards with intense confusion and dismay. Pounder's hard head, indeed, soon recovered the knock it had sustained; but his adversary lay senseless on the carpet, face foremost, where he fell, with a dark stream winding slowly, slowly, from his brown hair along the floor; and Tatters, who had barked furiously through the conflict, unnoticed by either of the men, though he made his teeth meet in Pounder's boot, sitting on end at his master's side, lamenting him in a series of loud, dismal, and long-protracted howls.

"It's a devil of a mess," said Pounder, panting for breath, and wiping the perspiration off his face while he slowly recovered the effect of his exer-

tions. "He's a right good man, though! I don't know I ever had hold of so good a man at the weight. I think I could have tackled him by myself, too. I was coming round again when you interfered between us. You must have hit uncommon hard, Mr. Multiple. See! you've broke my new umbrella all to shivers. Well, we must bring him to, and hush the whole thing up the best way we can."

So speaking, Pounder bent over the body of his late antagonist, and lifted his head from the floor to inspect the injuries he had received.

"Why, he don't move!" exclaimed the acting partner in great consternation. "Quick, Mr. Multiple! Water, water, for the love of heaven! There's a ewer somewhere in the front parlour. This is a bad business—a bad business, I fear!"

Multiple's face was ghastly white, and he trembled visibly; but there was something of the beast of prey even in his fear, and he looked the murderer he might have become, while he whispered huskily, "Better make sure. Help me to make sure, Pounder, and put him out of the way for good and all!"

He quailed beneath the other man's look.

There was in it contempt, defiance, menace; the indignation of a bold nature at a coward's cruelty; the warning flash of a long-repressed spirit that seemed to say, "Have a care! *My* blood is up, too, and it would take but little to make me lay you there beside him with a blow!"

In that moment each man felt how much he hated the other; but Pounder's spirit was, for the time, in the ascendant; and when he imperiously repeated his command to go for water, the other slunk from the room like a beaten hound.

At his return, they propped the sufferer to the best of their abilities, doing all that Pounder's experience suggested to restore consciousness, though in vain. Jack breathed, indeed, but it was with a heavy, stentorious snore, and he gave no other signs of vitality whatever.

"This will never do, Mr. Multiple," exclaimed his partner, after a last, unavailing effort. "The man will die if we can't get a doctor to him. This is something more than a common crack on the head. Stop a moment, sir; there's a surgeon lives next door. I'm sure of it, for I knew a lad taken there from a cab-accident last winter. We must carry him in directly. I see nothing else for it."

"It'll blow the whole thing," said the other, unwillingly. "What a fool you were, Pounder, to show him the bill!"

"Not so bad as if he died in our hands," expostulated his partner. "How should you like a coroner's inquest, Mr. Multiple? and a jury to view the premises? and you and me shifting from the dock to the witness-box, according to which could most criminate the other? I tell you, if he dies, that umbrella would hang either of us or both!"

He must have hated him very sincerely, or he never could have taken such delight in his confederate's discomfiture, being himself in an equally perilous situation.

Multiple was quite unnerved. The cold sweat stood on his face, and his teeth chattered, but his cunning did not forsake him, and dipping his handkerchief in the pool on the carpet, he smeared the edge of the passage steps carefully with blood.

"We must call it a fit, Pounder," said he, "and get somebody to swear he was subject to them. You must hide the umbrella away carefully, and take an opportunity of destroying it unseen. Let us have our story perfect, my good friend, that we

may both tell the same. A client comes in whom you don't know. You can swear you never saw him before; so, of course, you don't know him. He seems labouring under excitement, and is incoherent in his talk. You are used to people being incoherent in their talk when they want to borrow money. This will raise a laugh, and that is always in your favour. Seeing the man so excited, you endeavour to dissuade him from entering on business till he is cooler, and entreat him to call again. He leaves you in a towering passion, misses his footing on the slippery oilcloth outside, and falls with the back of his head against the edge of the top step, which inflicts the fatal injury. For a few minutes you are paralysed, and know not how to act. Then you remember your medical friend next door, and seek assistance to carry him in. I need not appear at all. Or, stay, I am passing by at that moment. You know me, though not intimately, and entreat me to help you. I comply, as any Christian would. I am on the Continent, travelling from place to place, address very uncertain. My evidence would be quite superfluous. I need not even be called."

Pounder smiled grimly. It was his partner all

over ; but he felt to fear him less now than he had done for many months. He was himself very callous to personal apprehension, and it was worth a considerable risk to have gained, by the events of the last half-hour, so strong a hold over one who had long had him in his power. A fair up-standing tussle, too, with a man of his own strength and weight, had done him a world of good. Altogether, Pounder felt more like what he was at Balham, though conscious at the same time of being mixed up with a very awkward catastrophe in the Strand.

“While the story is making,” said he, with a certain sardonic humour, “the subject of it will die, unless we bestir ourselves pretty smartly. Here ! catch hold of that cloth. Put it over his face. No need that everybody should see it, going from one door to the other. Wait while I lift his shoulders. Now help me with the legs. By Jove, what a fine-made chap he is ! D—n it, man, don’t hurt the dog !”

Multiple had inflicted a savage kick upon poor Batters, who resented interference with the lower part of his master’s body. Nothing daunted, the terrier would have made at him again, but some-

thing seemed to remind him all at once that this was no time for bickering, and he fell in with the mournful procession, walking peacefully behind the bearers and their burden, utterly dejected and forlorn.

The partners paused in the passage while one ran out to knock at the neighbouring door, and returned quickly to his task. No need, as Pounder said, that they should stand longer in the street than they could help. The precaution, though judicious, was unnecessary. There was but one solitary passenger, an ill-looking fellow in a shabby velveteen coat, to witness their proceedings, and he seemed quite unconscious of their presence. He could have found out, indeed, nothing he did not know before, however closely he had scanned them; but whatever his object might be, his interest seemed chiefly centered in a sack carried beneath his arm.

When Miss Prince's door was opened, however, by the astonished maid-of-all-work, Pounder, looking back for the dog, observed the street was empty, and Tatters was gone.

The consternation created throughout the whole establishment by this startling arrival may be

easily imagined. The maid-of-all-work, not subject to fainting fits unless when excited by drink, and debarred therefore from the resource of a good, hopeless, helpless swoon, screamed lustily, tapping the floor with alternate feet, as though dancing on hot plates of iron. Her shrieks brought Miss Prince to the landing on the stairs, who stood there for at least a minute, speechless, spell-bound, holding up her gloved hands in an attitude of overwhelming horror and consternation. She had scarcely made her appearance in this tragic character, ere Jane rushed from the upper floor with her cap-ribbons flaunting behind her, and Dot clinging to her skirts. Having left her younger charges safe, though insubordinate, in the nursery, she was less disposed than the others to put an alarming construction on the disturbance, and expressed her opinion audibly, and with strong marks of disapproval, that it was "only a drunken man, some friend of the lodger! and what business had they to bring him in here?"

Mrs. George was engaged on a shopping expedition with her husband, unfortunately for Miss Prince, who would otherwise have fallen back literally and metaphorically on the assistance of

her pupil. The strong, white arms would have supported, and the ample person sheltered the poor little governess, while Mrs. George's habits of command and tendency to take the entire management of everything and everybody about her, would have been invaluable in a crisis like the present. Seeing, however, that she was cheapening calico as far off as Regent Street, it was no use wishing for her. Philip, of course, was at his business ; but, fortunately, the most important person of all, viz., Doctor Blair, was within.

I believe it was Dot's voice, rather than any unusual sounds in the hall, that brought him out of his little laboratory in the back parlour. As his gaunt figure emerged from that retreat, it came in contact with Pounder's broad back, and looking over that stalwart bearer's head, the doctor perceived at once that some serious accident, requiring his professional assistance, must have taken place. Blair's eccentricities were chiefly apparent when off duty. A call to action seemed to dispel them at once ; and when his professional instincts were in the ascendant, he could behave like other people. With a glance at Dot, to make sure her precious safety was in no way compromised, for

the child's curly locks and round astonished eyes were sufficiently conspicuous in the throng, he whipped his coat off, turned up his shirt-sleeves, and pushed Pounder aside from his place at the sufferer's shoulders, in the twinkling of an eye.

"In here, mon! in here," said he, partly pulling the body, and partly hustling the bearers into the front parlour, which constituted Philip Stoney's bedroom. "There'll no' be a toom space to dandle a cat in yon bit box, where I keep my instruments. Come in ben, mon, and lay the pair thing on the bed. See till I tak' the cloth off, an' I'll sune redd him up, 'gin he be na clean past the joiner's skill. Ay, ay, it's been a gay clean lick yon! I've seen a mon clinkit down on the stanes as deed's a 'nit wi' less!"

Talking the whole time, he stripped the covering from off Jack's face, propped him gently on the pillows, carefully laying clean towels beneath his still bleeding head, applied restoratives which, to a certain extent, acted at once, snipped away the brown locks matted now with blood, and did everything that surgery and sympathy together could accomplish for the recovery of the patient; but in all his evolutions, and notwithstanding that his

attention seemed completely engrossed with the task, he contrived to interpose his person between his two visitors and the door.

“Bide a wee,” said the doctor, with a hitch of his gaunt body in the way, as Multiple tried to sidle quietly past, and make his escape unobserved. “Bide a wee, mon, or we ken if the lad’s deed or alive. Hey! tak’ yon bason, an’ haud it *here*, the height o’ my knee. Catch hold o’ yon bit napkin. Canny, mon! Canny! I’m sayin’! Though it’s joiner’s wark, ye ken, it’s no’ a mantlepice ye’re mendin’, but a mon’s heed!”

Thus did Doctor Blair skilfully contrive to keep Multiple within reach; nor was it until his experience had been satisfied life was not positively endangered, that he relaxed his vigilance to inquire, in a franker and less suspicious tone, the origin of the accident.

Pounder told their story as agreed upon. He was unable, he said, to identify the gentleman; their conversation had been exceedingly short, and confined to business matters. The gentleman seemed flushed and excited. He had, himself, remarked a strange, sleepy expression in the eye; so much so, that he suggested they should defer any-

thing conclusive to a second interview. The gentleman walked out hurriedly, Pounder should say, under great excitement. No sooner was he in the passage, than he fell with a heavy crash, cutting his head against the step. He might have slipped, for the oilcloth was very slippery; but Pounder was inclined to think he had a fit of some sort, and no doubt he was subject to them.

To this lucid statement Doctor Blair listened very attentively, making only a strange grimace at the mention of the word "fit;" then he turned sharp round on Multiple, and asked if he knew anything of the other gentleman, or the young man whom they both brought in?

Multiple knew the other gentleman slightly; had made his acquaintance in the City; believed him to be a most respectable man; was passing the door by chance at the time of this deplorable accident, and rendered what little assistance he could, as a matter of course. With regard to the sufferer, really could not speak positively. It was difficult to identify features when in that state of collapse. Mr. Blair's professional experience (he believed he had the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Blair—he begged pardon, *Doctor Blair*). Well,

Doctor Blair's professional experience knew this better than he did, and that he *had* professional experience was obvious from his skilful treatment of the patient, now, he hoped, in a fair way of recovery. They were both much indebted to him for his kindness, and the other gentleman would take care that any expenses incurred should be repaid. He was not staying in town himself, and was even at the present moment very much engaged, and desirous to be off.

The Doctor supposed that he "had gotten a name and an' address, like other folk."

Certainly, his name was Francis. John Francis, Esq., Pavilion Hotel, Folkestone. He was only in London for the day; and, indeed, was about to return to the Continent forthwith.

All this sounded plausible enough. Blair, though not quite satisfied, was forced to content himself with it. There seemed no pretext for attributing foul play to either of these gentlemen; no sufficient reason for placing the affair in the hands of the police. He did not think much of the last speaker, with his flashy dress and pretentious manners; but even if the patient's injuries should take a fatal turn, the other party would be forthcoming,

no doubt. He knew the other party by sight, as a householder next door. Being a lodger himself, Mr. Blair had great faith in the respectability of householders. The name, he now ascertained, was Pounder. Well, he must look to Mr. Pounder, in the event of an inquiry becoming necessary. What he did not like in the business was, the suggestion of a fit; and he kept muttering, in a jerking, uncomfortable sort of way, "Fett, indeed! Fett! Whatna like fetts yon, to cut a gash in a mon's *occiput* 'hree inches long, and as deep as a dyke-back? Weel, weel, there's some would ha' redded him up waur nor Andrew Blair. I ken fine the way to clout a broken heed, wha but me? I've sat an' sorted them by twanties. It was, ay, Whaur's Blair? I'm wantan' Blair. Rin for Doctor Blair?"

"Cows' milk an' mares' milk,
An' every beast that bears milk,
Between Saint Johnstoun and Dundee,
Come a' to me—come a' to me."

Then he turned to Pounder and told him point-blank that he should hold him accountable for the whole transaction, both to the friends of the patient and to the public, should any inquiries be hereafter

instituted—a responsibility which the money-lender gladly accepted, feeling he was thus further neutralizing the obligations that existed between his partner and himself.

As soon as Jack had been made pretty comfortable on Philip Stoney's bed, though he had not yet recovered consciousness, Pounder took his leave, Multiple having departed directly he could do so without appearing too unfeeling. Blair then proceeded up-stairs to reconcile Miss Prince to this invasion of her premises, and found that little lady in a towering passion, at least for *her*. In any one of less equable temper, it would have been but mild disapproval. "She had no notion," she said, "of her house being turned into an hospital. Why didn't they take the poor thing *to* the hospital, or the public-house, or the workhouse, or somewhere? and she was surprised at Doctor Blair, *that* she was; so inconsiderate. She should have thought he knew better; *that* she should!"

The doctor was not unskilled in the very rudiments of his profession, nor ignorant how the gentle sex may be most readily brought round, under anything like discomposure or vexation. He was well aware that in such cases it is sound

practice to eschew argument, soothe irritation, and stimulate curiosity.

“Miss Prince,” said he, with a certain pomp that he had found imposed successfully on his landlady, “I’ve no’ got to be told the day that ye’re mair a Samauritan than a Londoner. I’m no’ sayin’ but yon lad in the front parlour may ha’ fall’n among thieves. There’s a mystery somewhere, my good leddy, an’ a pirl it’ll tak’ time to unwind. A bonny lad, he is, too, an’ an awfu’ clink he’s gotten in his brain-pan, if brains he behove to have like you an’ me. Pairfect quiet, mem, an’ a good sleep, once he’s sensible, may bring him round ; but it’s a doubtful case, my good leddy ; a doubtful case ; an’ I would like weel to get your opinion ’gin ye would step down, an’ tak’ a look of him. Ye’re a quiet body, Miss Prince, an’ your foot falls as light as a fairy’s.”

Could any woman, especially any *little* woman, exulting in the airy proportions of her figure, and secretly proud of her feet, resist such a proposal, so beautifully put ?

Miss Prince smiled blandly, nay affectionately, in her tall lodger’s face, and followed him downstairs like a middle-aged sylph. It needed but

one peep into the front parlour, where Jack Brooke lay, to convert her feelings of disapproval into the warmest sympathy. She saw a towel steeped in blood on the floor, a long figure prostrate on the bed, a scatter of brown hair and another red-stained cloth on the pillow ; and though she sickened and trembled, while her eyes filled with tears, the brave little woman whispered her readiness to remain all day, if necessary, at her post, as nurse to the sufferer.

This, however, was by no means Blair's object. Having won her over so judiciously, he was now only anxious to get her out of the room, and Miss Prince went up-stairs "all of a twitter," as she observed, without identifying Jack Brooks ; having seen, indeed, nothing of him but his blood and the back of his bandaged head.

Doctor Blair, though, had risen fifty per cent. in his landlady's good opinion with the events of the morning. "Such a skilful operator, my dear," as she afterwards observed to Mrs. George Stoney, in furnishing a confidential report of all that had taken place. "Not that I saw him at work, of course ; but his manipulation, I understand, is considered by the profession perfection. And so

gentlemanly with it. Reminds me of my poor uncle—military, you know; and such a fine figure of a man! but affable to a degree. I'm sure when he came to take the lodgings I'd no idea. It only shows how people may be deceived. I do assure you, Isabella, when he took me down to the poor young man's room, and I saw the bandages and the blood, and all, on the floor, I felt, if I hadn't had such entire confidence in him, both professionally and as a perfect gentleman, I must have dropped. It's been quite an adventure, dear, hasn't it? But we mustn't make a noise talking, as our good doctor pronounces that perfect quiet—with skilful treatment and nourishing food, of course—but that perfect quiet is indispensable for recovery."

From Miss Prince's raptures it may be gathered that her scientific lodger had made a rapid and effectual conquest of his landlady, and had gained in a few minutes what she would have termed a large share of her esteem. The only intimation, however, she vouchsafed him of this favourable state of feeling was a mild request that he would partake of their family tea up-stairs, in Mrs. Stoney's sitting-room, at seven o'clock—an invita-

tion which suited the doctor remarkably well, inasmuch as he was at that moment meditating the removal of his patient, by means of his own strong arms and the stout maid-of-all-work's help, to his bedroom on the drawing-room floor, which he would vacate for a shake-down in the sitting-room adjoining, and where he could have him under his own hourly surveillance, especially during the night. Doctor Blair was a great man for "watching a case," exemplifying the necessity of such vigilance by the following metaphor:—

"The whole art of surgery, an' the pharmacopœia to boot, 's just a bung in a bar'l. Gin ye dinna want the bar'l wasted, ye'll keep your eye on the bung; aince it's oot, there's nae mair drink till the neist brewin'."

Jack Brooke then lay, all unconscious, outside Philip Stoney's bed; and the latter, plodding on, column after column, with laborious pen, little dreamed that his daily life was again to be interwoven with associations he loved so dearly for Helen's sake. *Her* brother! Could he have guessed the truth, I question if the clerk's accounts would have come right that day, if correct orders would have been given to travellers or

light porters, and necessary letters written without mistakes by post-time. Business men are sometimes in love, too ; but it is not a business transaction : and I would rather myself take a clerk who had been married a few years, and was familiar with the blessing, than one on the eve of entering the holy state.

Philip Stoney had tried hard to shake off the influence of his dream, and succeeded as a right-thinking, resolute man always does succeed ; but though the vision had departed, there was a faded and reflected light still left. He was not happier—far from it ; but he was better ; wiser, sadder, quieter, but indubitably better ; and this, I think, is usually the effect wrought on a noble nature by deep sorrow of the heart. It suffers in silence, and therefore, while it suffers, it reflects. Joy makes her favourites genial, frank, high-spirited, and out-spoken ; but grief teaches her pupils purity, sympathy, self-sacrifice, and trust. Her lessons are hard indeed to learn, and harder to forget ; but I think they will not leave us with the rest of our education ; and when we have done with the training of the body and the teaching of the intellect, we shall find they were the

true schooling of the soul. Philip's early life had fitted him as well to obtain mastery over self as to battle with the world. Habits of business form, perhaps, the best of all mere physical groundworks on which to build up a character of self-reliance and self-restraint, producing, as they seldom fail to do, a tendency to close reasoning and constant mental supervision. That system of "taking stock" is a wonderful up-rooter of false ideas, a wonderful leveller of self-conceit. A man who is exact in trifles will seldom deceive himself in important matters, just as the reckoner who adds his pence up correctly is little liable to make mistakes when he reaches the column that sets forth the pounds.

An athlete of mere average energy may easily overtax his muscles to the detriment of his mind. Excess of physical exertion, even when beneficial to the frame, robs the brain of that mysterious fluid which constitutes its motive power, and for which science has yet to find a name, so that while body and mind act and react on each other with surprising fidelity, the grosser slave of the two is extremely prone to fail his fellow-workman should he find his share of the labour one jot

more than he considers his due. The youth who turns his attention to becoming a wrestler will, even if he succeeds in his ambition, never be more than

! "The best wrestler on the green;"

and the gymnasium, with all its advantages, is not the best school from which to turn out a truly successful man.

A liberal education, as it is called, on the other hand, confined far too exclusively to the ornaments of literature, is prone to produce nothing better than a mere elegant scholar, whose very studies have taught him to relish those luxuries of the intellect which waste and enervate the character, just as stimulants sap and destroy the frame. He may write a pleasing romance, perhaps, or a fine poem, but he will not be found in the front rank of those who further the good work with hand and brain. He will neither be a great statesman, a great soldier, a great orator, philosopher, discoverer, or philanthropist. To be great, requires not only the comprehensive mind that embraces the widest views, but also the keen perception that detects the slightest flaw, the orderly exactitude that pays scrupulous attention

to details. A bad man of business is never a really good man at anything in the world.

Helen's training, too, like that of Philip, had during her earlier years been of a kind to elevate her out of self. Though an only daughter, living with a father and two brothers, she had not been subject to the over-indulgence such a position usually entails. Her father's calls on her time and patience had served to teach her the hard lesson very soon, and she had profited by it.

The last person Helen ever thought of was Miss Brooke ; and now, in her great sorrow, this habit, engrained in her nature, of considering others before herself, alone enabled her to bear the daily trials of the present, and to face the gloomy perspective of the future.

There was one indulgence, however, notwithstanding her fortitude, to which Helen clung with strange pertinacity. It was her afternoon walk, when she was dismissed attendance on her father during the hour or two of his customary slumber.

Wet or dry, she scarcely ever missed it now ; and the servants at Bridlemere, taking note, according to custom, and discussing with great freedom their young lady's doings, though they

wondered that she always took the same direction, agreed that "she looked very peaking, poor thing; and the walk, no doubt, did her a world of good!"

Even the Squire, feeble as he was, and engrossed with the new medicine that was to restore his failing powers so miraculously, found time to observe Helen's altered looks, and found fault, with the irritability of self-reproach, because she was so pale.

On the very day that Jack had gone up to London in secesy—nay, at the very hour when he was lying unconscious on Philip Stoney's bed, and Blair was making arrangements to move that fine helpless form up-stairs to his own, the Squire was croaking out a feeble remonstrance on his daughter's habit of sitting brooding with her face so near the fire.

"It burns every atom of colour off your cheek, Helen," he quavered out, as angrily as if deprecating some loss of property, or injury to himself; "and you will be the only Brooke, from old Dorcas downwards, ever known to wear a pale face. In my time, young people didn't use to sit moping over the fire all the best part of a spring

morning. They bustled about, like bees in a beehive, from sunrise to sunset, as merry as May-day. I can't think what has come to them all now. What does Jack mean by bouncing off like this, without a 'By your leave,' or 'With your leave?' and who is to see Marks, I should like to know, about the road-rate? I'd go myself, if I thought it would hold up (Helen, put my gloves along with the hat, instead of laying them across the stick, where they're no use); but it looks like rain—uncommon like rain, and it wouldn't do to get wet, first day of going out, and all. Middlesworth market? What d'ye mean about Middlesworth market? He never *would* go there without seeing me first! Then Walter's forgotten his old father, since he's been so much at Tollesdale. Walter and—what's his name?—and you, Helen, all undutiful! Three undutiful children! Not you, my darling! not *you*!" he continued, whimpering, as his better feelings obtained the mastery, and he remembered his daughter's gentleness and patience, and sad, uneventful life, wearisome for one so young. Then he pulled her face down to his own, and kissed it, wetting it with his tears; but forgot them long ere they

were dry, and so maundering on about his broth and his medicine, dropped asleep at his usual time, and left the poor, pale, fond attendant free for an hour at least.

So Helen put on her walking things, and emerged from the breakfast-room window—she always went out at the breakfast-room window now—then proceeded right across the park, till she reached a clump of trees on a rising ground, from which, looking back, Bridlemere House could be seen plainly, but beyond which the slope of the hill hid it from the eye. Here she stopped to gather a violet or two nestling under the old elms, and hid them in her bosom. But she kissed the sweet flowers tenderly before she put them away, and a drop fell on them that was clear and pure as the dew of heaven, though it came but from a poor, aching, earthly heart. She had always loved violets from a child, but their fragrance had never been so painful yet so dear to her as now. Then she walked on with slower and sadder step, avoiding a certain stile at which she remembered to have been affronted once by the unwelcome courtesy of a stranger, who—was no stranger now!

She started, as if she had been stung, and hurried fiercely forward in the direction of Dame Batters' cottage. She paid a visit there most days now, and was welcome as an angel of light to the poor old woman, who loved to relate her troubles to "our Miss Brooke" over and over again, never tired of descanting on her Jem's disappearance; her own rheumatism; the changes—dear me! the changes wrought by time; the wickedness of Middlesworth; the fire at the brewery, and the sad loss sustained by the town in the ruin of Stoney Brothers.



CHAPTER V.

A BUNDLE OF STICKS.



ONE, two, three, four, five, six ; and one for the pot ! I've often heard my uncle declare—a military man like yourself, Doctor—that weak tea was as unwholesome as weak brandy-and-water. Relaxing, he said, and deleterious at the same time, while strong tea braces the nerves, and strong 'grog,' I think he called it, gives a fillip to the system. Only think !”

Miss Prince sat in great state at her tea-table in the front bedroom, now used conjointly by herself and the Stoneys as a refectory. They “took their meals” together, the little woman contriving in this, as in many other ways, to save her lodgers’ pockets at the expense of her own. On the

present occasion, with a playful application of the old school-girl vocabulary, she persisted in considering the party as "her treat;" in no way disguising the fact that it was held for the greater glorification of her new favourite, Doctor Blair. She and Isabella had therefore attired themselves in their garments of state; the latter looking very handsome in a black satin dress that had already done a good deal of duty on festive occasions; but that set off to advantage her white skin, her massive proportions, and the braids of her long, silky, dark hair. Miss Prince herself was dressed in a brocade, of an enormous pattern, not unlike the papering of a very old fashioned bedroom, but of a costly texture, which for value, and indeed antiquity, might have belonged to the Queen of Sheba. It seems a peculiarity of this particular fabric that it is prone to force much of the wearer's person into an unbroken protuberance immediately below the chin, and on this protuberance Miss Prince had planted a wide cameo brooch, representing several naked figures, in attitudes more or less suggestive of classical beauty and Pagan propensities. Thus attired, the little lady considered herself, as it were, *en tenue de campagne*, but the

addition of a pair of green kid gloves brought her out forthwith in "review order." She waved her gloved hand over the teapot, and told the Doctor once more, and for the tenth time, that "she was glad to see him, and hoped he was a tea drinker."

Now, Doctor Blair had been a traveller in his day, and before he joined the Dancing Hussars (which regiment he had also accompanied through many a long march in the glowing mornings of the tropics) had wandered, on his own account, over almost every part of the world in which tea is consumed. Had drank it hot, weak, and unpalatable, in lonely posting-houses, on those dreary, monotonous, interminable journeys across Russia, that oppress the senses like a dream, and like a dream leave no salient points, no definite objects nor events by which to distinguish them when they are past. Had chipped off corners from a solid brick of it with the handle of his knife, and boiled them over a fire of camels' dung in the wastes of Tartary, to share the beverage with a sallow, flat-faced, beady-eyed comrade in a sheepskin garment, greasy, woolly, and lined throughout with vermin. Had even watered spoonfuls of it lying at the bottom of transparent

porcelain cups, and pledged in the steaming draught no less dignified a host than a mandarin of the second class in the Celestial Empire.

Cold and strong in Crimean trenches, weak and scalding in Parisian *salons*, Blair had drank tea wherever tea was made, but never, he declared, with such satisfaction as to-night; for was not Dot flitting gaily about him, bringing sugar, cream, muffins, cut bread-and-butter; and was he not prescribing to his favourite, and administering, surreptitious slices of the latter, plastered with jam a quarter of an inch thick?

“Your tea’s as strong as brandy, Miss Prince,” said the Doctor, approvingly, finishing his first cup at two gulps. “I’ll no’ say strong tea’s as good as strong toddy, though; but little Missy here is wearyin’ for a sup, and I’ll just ask ye for another dish before ye begin to a second brew.”

“Now, Dot! I will not have you worry the Doctor,” interposed Mrs. George, already prepared, womanlike, to fall down and worship, because the visitor had been represented to her as a hero. “She’s such a child for the gentlemen, Doctor. I declare to you I can’t keep her away from them; and papa spoils her so, he makes her worse. I’m

sure, Dot, if you go on as you've begun, I don't know what you'll come to when you're grown up. Don't let her tease you, Doctor. Dot! do you hear me? Get off the gentleman's knee!"

But Dot knew better. Another prescription was in course of preparation, and the merry eyes laughed and sparkled while the remedy was stuffed into the rosy, expectant mouth. Then Dot put both her fat arms round her new friend's neck, and kissed him publicly, without the slightest affectation of diffidence or discomposure. "I like you, good Blair!" pronounced the young lady, as clearly as the process of mastication would permit. "I'm to be your wife, you know, instead of Uncle Phil's, ain't I, mamma? I like you, and I like Uncle Phil, and I like papa, and I like mamma, and I like Miss Princee, and I like Jane, but I don't like Mr. Multiple!"

Dot chanted the roll of her predilections in the sing-song with which children usually get over anything like repetition, as being less wearisome than simple recitative. It is a tone that forces itself on the least attentive circle, and Dot's audience were by this time listening to her open-mouthed.

“Mr. Multiple, child!” said her mother, laughing, in spite of herself, at Dot’s eagerness. “What *can* have put Mr. Multiple in your head?”

Philip, too, looked up from his plate uneasily at the name. It sounded harsh in his ears. Perhaps he had learned, as people so circumstanced always do learn unwelcome facts, that the gentleman was a great deal at Bridlemere; and because he had resigned his treasure was no reason he should cease to be jealous of it.

“I saw Mr. Multiple to-day,” replied Dot, nodding her head a great many times to imply certainty. “I saw him with good Blair on the staircase. Didn’t I, good Blair?”

“The bairn was playin’ herself on the stair,” observed the Doctor, thus appealed to, “whan the puir fallow that’s gotten his heed brok’ was brought ben to this gentlemon’s room. I was feared the bit lassie might ha’ gotten a fright, mem,” he added, apologetically to his little friend’s mamma, “but she’s a fine spirit for sic a young thing. It would be a gruesome bogle, I’m thinkin’ that would daunt Miss Dot.”

All this, like most indeed of the guest’s conversation, was Hebrew to Mrs. Stoney; but she

bowed, nevertheless, with great dignity, and, turning sharply on the child, repeated her question—

“What can you mean, you silly thing! about Mr. Multiple? I can’t think when you have ever set eyes on him, even last winter, at Middlesworth; but how dare you say you saw him here to-day?”

“I *did* see him, mamma,” answered the child, gravely, colouring up very much, and nestling closer to “good Blair’s” side. “He was helping another gentleman to carry the thing into Uncle Phil’s room. The other gentleman lives next door. I often see him go out when I’m at tea. I don’t like Mr. Multiple, mamma, because Jane said he was a bad man, when we met him in Hosier Street, near my own home; and I would have told him to go away to-day, but the thing was covered up, and had blood on it, and I was frightened, and hid my face in Jane’s gown till good Blair shut the door.”

The Doctor looked from one to the other of the tea-drinkers with suspicion stamped on his shrewd Scotch face. George Stoney, though lately become the most silent of men, replied to the

question conveyed by the expression of that hard-featured countenance. "When Dot speaks like that," said he, "you may be sure she is in earnest, and knows what she is about. The child never told a story in her life, and never forgot a face she had once seen. It's a peculiarity she inherits neither from her mamma nor me."

"It's impossible Mr. Multiple could have been here to-day," interposed Uncle Phil, disregarding Dot's reproachful looks. "I have reason to believe he is at this moment in the town of Middlesworth—and I wish I was there, too," added Philip, to himself, with a sigh.

"Do you know anything of this Mr. Multiple?" inquired the Doctor, carelessly, preparing at the same time another liberal mouthful of consolation for his pet. "Is he a gentleman, or a professional man? or just a do-nothing, daundering and trafficking about?"

"He's a man with plenty of money," replied Philip, speaking very fast, while his colour rose; "and seems to do plenty of harm with it. I know nothing of him myself, and have heard but little from the Middlesworth people. That little is quite enough. I wish to heaven he

had never come within a hundred miles of the town !”

He hid his face in his teacup when he had finished, a little ashamed of his ebullition.

“ And which o’ the gentlemen do they call Mr. Multiple, my bonnie bird ?” asked Doctor Blair, in coaxing tones of the lady on his knee. “ Was it the stout, wise-like man wi’ a white cravat, an’ a decent black cot like a meenister, or the set-up, saucy chap wi’ a curly heed, and saft hands, and rings, and bonny-dies, an’ ‘havers,’ that set a woman better than a mon.”

Constant practice, and feminine affection, had rendered Dot a proficient in the Scottish tongue, of which language indeed she favoured Jane with many choice samples in the nursery ; she understood her gigantic playfellow perfectly well, and replied without hesitation—

“ It was Mr. Multiple that went backwards into Uncle Phil’s room. I don’t know the other gentleman, though I see him when I’m at tea, and Jane says he’s a curmudgeon. But I do know Mr. Multiple, and I don’t like him.”

Doctor Blair looked thoughtful. He felt satisfied the child was sure of her man, and, indeed,

Dot's positive, though simple manner, carried conviction along with it. He ran over the circumstances of the whole affair in his own mind, and it looked more mysterious now when thus reviewed than it had done under the immediate bustle created by the emergency. Two men bringing another in, half-dead—indeed, a good deal more than half to any but professional eyes—accounting for the sufferer's state by a tale that bore on the face of it marks of medical inconsistency and untruth; only remaining to see the patient well bestowed, but hurrying off before they could know for certain whether he would or would not recover from the blow, and one of them giving a false name before he left!

“John Francis,” repeated the Scotchman, in indignant murmurs to himself. “John Francis, indeed; Paveelion Hotel, Folkestone. There's a wise-like address for a decent mon! Ye thought ye'd be like the tailor lad wha cuttit aff' his ain shanks wi' his ain shears, an' had gotten a fule to your surgeon. Bide you a wee, Maister John Francis, or Multiple, or whatever they call ye. Andry Blair'll be upsides wi' ye, for all that's come and gaun yet. An' ye're kenspeckle

eneugh, my mon. Even the bairnie here was dooms sure o' ye at the very onset. Dinna *you* think I'm like to forget ye ; and once your heed's under my belt, I'll wring it aff for ye, sure as my name's Blair !"

But it was not the Doctor's practice to wear his thoughts on his sleeve, and he entertained, moreover, certain old-fashioned notions as to the stringent requirements of good breeding. He always admitted, despite his ungainly exterior, that he was rather a ladies' man, and he busied himself now to hand the teacups, carry the kettle, and cut more bread-and-butter, of which seductive food he and Dot had between them consumed an inordinate quantity, with an alacrity that won him golden opinions from his landlady.

Miss Prince thought she had never before met one of the opposite sex who combined, as she expressed it, such delicate attentions with such a manly deportment. Lord Waywarden had hitherto constituted her ideal of what a gentleman should be ; but Lord Waywarden, though doubtless a most agreeable person, never could keep awake to talk to her for more than five minutes at a time. Neither was his lordship's conversation, she must

allow, so improving as the Doctor's, nor his accent so impressive and remarkable. Miss Prince was quite gratified, when she came to think of it, that the poor young man, whose identity she little suspected, had been brought in to recover consciousness beneath her roof.

The teapot had to be refilled more than once, and under its genial influence the ladies' tongues were loosened, and they discoursed volubly on their own and their neighbours' affairs. Wine is, no doubt, an incentive to conversation; but I think for the encouragement of that kind of talk which attributes startling motives to common actions; which exchanges information, remarkable alike for its imprudence and its improbability; which is understood, in short, by the generic term "gossip," the bottle is far behind the teapot.

Miss Prince's third cup led her insensibly back to the spacious halls and lofty chambers of Tollesdale. She impressed on her guest, at great length, the height of the hall, the proportions and furniture (different in each), of the rooms on the ground floor, the number and value of the pictures, the width of the staircase, and the length of the conservatory. Thence, by an easy transition, diverging

into an eulogy of his lordship's character, his hospitality, his magnificence, his county influence, and the affability of his manners. "Lady Waywarden, too," continued Miss Prince, warming to the subject as she sipped her tea, "is a most elegant person. She was the Court beauty, Doctor Blair; quite the Court beauty of her day, when you, sir, must have been' a boy at school, and I myself was"—(here her conscience, admonished by a sparkle of mirth in Mrs. George's eyes, gave her a vigorous nudge)—"well, when I was a good deal younger than I am now. She never had his lordship's angelic temper, sir; far from it; but her complexion was like a girl's of eighteen, and her handwriting copper-plate. I do assure you, positive copper-plate. You must have observed, Doctor, how a fine skin runs in families. My own poor mother was called the White Rose of Tiverton, and Isabella here, Mrs. Stoney, has three sisters—haven't you, dear?—with velvet skins like your own. It's no wonder Lady Julia should be beautiful. Lady Julia Treadwell, Doctor, that's their only daughter, and my pupil. I think my favourite pupil, after you, Isabella dear. A most engaging young lady,

Doctor Blair. Such a figure! such spirits! such talents! The best dancer, so they said, yet turned out by the Entrechats, *père et fils*, and as kind a heart as ever beat in a pure and virgin bosom!"

Here Miss Prince blushed a little, coughed, and paused, being out of breath.

The Doctor thought he was expected to say something, so he hitched Dot on to the other knee, and blurted out—

"It's a wonder she's no' got married yet!"

Miss Prince nodded her head a great many times, thereby bespeaking the attention of her audience, especially Mrs. George, ere she observed sagaciously—

"Quite a gentleman's remark, I'm sure, and more to the purpose than you might have supposed. I think there is no doubt she *is* going to be married, and that almost immediately, though as yet it is to be kept a profound secret."

Mrs. George half rose from her chair at the news.

"Oh! I *am* so glad!" she exclaimed, as though the intelligence imparted some keen and inexplicable joy; and that Lady Julia's coverture could signify one toss of a halfpenny to *her*. Even

Dot looked up delighted. Miss Prince herself was vibrating all over with suppressed importance and satisfaction. What is there in the matrimonial yoke that its imposition on a fresh bondsman should afford such universal contentment to the whole of the gentler sex? It cannot be the unworthy consideration that another competitor is promoted out of the ranks; for grandmamma on crutches, who has long withdrawn from the game, and Miss Saucebox there in short frocks, who has not yet become a player, are equally sincere in their congratulations. Everybody knows that at a wedding the church is filled with women who have no concern, directly or indirectly, with the principal performers. I don't think I ever heard of a man attending this sacred ordinance unless compelled to do so, and the compulsion, by the way, is invariably under female pressure. Is it then unmixed joy, I say, at a sister's triumph, or gratitude for her deliverance from the perils of spinsterhood, or a fine liberal satisfaction in the victory of the good cause? I am inclined to repudiate all these explanations, and to believe that, like the Ministerial party in the House of Commons, the whole female sex exult, as an

abstract question of principle, in the winning of every additional unit to the side of the Government.

"I'm afraid I am very indiscreet," resumed Miss Prince, with a smile at the Doctor; "but among friends I may be confident it will go no further. My sweet pupil, as I am informed, is about to bestow her hand on a very old acquaintance, and a very near neighbour, and a very handsome young gentleman. Mr. Stoney, *you* must know whom I mean!"

Mr. Stoney, thus adjured, woke up from a brown study, and guessed Sir Abraham Evergreen, a county baronet of seventy, who had buried two wives already, and lived at least forty miles from Tollesdale, as the crow flies. His suggestion was coughed down at once.

"It is a most suitable match," continued the tea-maker, with a dignified wave of the unoccupied hand in its green kid glove. "Suitable in years, connections, personal appearance, expectations, really in every respect, and I am heartily glad of it. What do you think, my dear Isabella? What do you think of young Mr. Brooke, of Bridlemere?"

Philip looked up interested enough now, though for an instant something swept across his face like pain. His sister-in-law saw it, though no one else did, and she repeated Miss Prince's words in such a tone of wonder as started that lady again at score.

"Not the eldest Mr. Brooke; not the young Squire as they call him, who was never much of a favourite with my sweet girl; but the second son, Mr. Walter. Such a handsome young man! very dashing, very accomplished! They will, indeed, be a most elegant couple!"

"All this is vary inter—esting," observed the Doctor, fidgeting on his chair, now that he had finished his tea, and beginning to feel it was time to go and look after his patient. "An' I'm thinkin' if the leddy was *your* scholar, mem, she'll be as gude as she's bonny. Are ye wantin' down, little missie? Ye'll excuse my takin' leave of the company for the present, Miss Prince. I've a bit joiner's wark, ye ken, that will noo want shuperveesion. May be, I'll hae to pit in a tack, just to keep the bung in the bar'l yet. I've had a vara pleesan' crack, an' a most deleeshus tea, and soe I'll just tak' a French leave o' ye, wi' a *Bong sware, la compagnie!*"

Mollified, however, by the entreaties of all parties—for all, except perhaps Philip, were bursting with curiosity—the Doctor promised to look in later, with news of his patient, pending which return Miss Prince flourished the teapot once again, for a little more gossip, and another cup of her favourite beverage.

“Have I astonished you enough, my dears?” said she, looking round triumphant. “or shall I tell you another piece of news about the old county in which we have all passed so many happy days? Ah! I’ve got a budget of marriages for you when once I begin. What should you say if Mr. Walter Brooke were not the only one of his family about to enter the holy state?”

Philip turned very pale, but answered never a word.

“Say!” exclaimed Mrs. George, advancing boldly to the rescue, though fearful of what was coming next. “Why, that it was extremely improbable, unless you had it on the very best authority. Rumour, we used to learn at school, has a hundred tongues. When the rumour is concerning marriages, I think a hundred thousand would be nearer the mark.”

“Well, my dear,” admitted Miss Prince, “I’ll allow I’m not so certain of this wedding as the other. I’ve often been surprised, though, that Miss Brooke hasn’t married years ago. With her beauty, and her sweet temper, and her expectations from her uncle, I don’t know any young lady less entitled to remain in a state of single blessedness. Don’t you think so, Mr. Philip? You know her, I believe, better than any of the other townspeople in Middlesworth.”

Philip forced himself to answer with a brave fixed face—

“I had the pleasure of knowing Miss Brooke, and seeing her very often in her own family. She is too good for any man, were he the best and noblest in the land. I trust she will be happy with him. Who—who did you say it was, Miss Prince?”

His lips were dry and white while he asked. He had not before realized the amount of hope that lay stifled, but still existent in his heart, till these last tidings came to sear out every trace of his folly, as with a hot iron. It was a friend’s hand, too, that thus applied the cautery. A gentle, kindly hand that would not have given him a

moment's suffering for a kingdom, yet it seared him deep, steady, unshrinking and pitiless, because unconscious of his pain.

"That's what I always thought, Mr. Philip," exclaimed Miss Prince exultingly. "From the time I first set eyes on her, at our archery meeting, when Lady Waywarden said it was dull, and damp, and there should never be another at Tollesdale—and my lady kept her word, too, for that matter—I always thought if I'd been a man, that was the girl I should have chosen for my wife. She mightn't have had Lady Julia's sparkle and spirits, and what I call perfect finish of company manners—for, to be sure, she hadn't the same advantages of education; but to see her come into a room, with her beautiful head up, and her noble, quiet walk, she was more like a queen than a simple English lady; and when she turned those deep, dark eyes upon me, with a gentle sorrowful look in them, like a deer's, why I used to feel as if I could burst out crying, and hug her round the neck, if she hadn't been so tall. Couldn't *you*, Mr. Philip?"

If he hadn't been a man, he could have burst out crying now, and as for hugging, why, not to

mention Miss Brooke, he could have hugged the little tea-maker herself, and welcome, for the way in which she spoke of his heart's-delight. It was torture, no doubt, but there was, nevertheless, a wild, maddening thrill of ecstacy in the very pain.

You see he had not even heard the dear name spoken for so long. He was like a man who thinks by abstaining from water to cure the fever of thirst. No wonder the ripple of the stream was sweeter than music in his ears. I have known men, and women too, declare they would rather hear a beloved object maligned than not mentioned at all, and it is doubtless pleasant to defend the absent, who are never really absent from our thoughts. How then can we but feel kindly towards the impartial observer (of its own sex, of course), who betrays a tendency to fall down and grovel in the dust before our idol, as we do ourselves?

“You were a great favourite of hers, Miss Prince, I know,” said Philip warmly. “I have often heard her speak about you, and you know how truthful and sincere she was. You—you didn’t hear anything for *certain*, Miss Prince, I think you said?”

He had put his lips to the pleasant cup now, he couldn't resist, and the bitter drop, as usual, was not far off.

"Not for certain, exactly," replied Miss Prince ; "but still I think, between you and me, Mr. Philip on the very best authority. You see, I occasionally receive a letter from Lady Waywarden's maid—her *confidential* maid, you understand—a most respectable person, whom, indeed, when I quitted Tollesdale, I requested to inform me at stated intervals of the welfare of the family. Her ladyship, you know, is much engaged, and has little time to spare for mere private letter-writing, and Lady Julia is apt to forget these duties till the post has gone out, and it is too late. Well, it was only this morning I heard from Elise of her young lady's approaching marriage to Mr. Brooke ; and in the same letter she tells me that there seems every chance of a double wedding at Bridlemere, for a gentleman, a great friend of Mr. Walter, is never out of the house now ; and the Squire's groom told my lord's second coachman that the servants understood it was all regularly arranged, and as soon as his master got a little better, Miss Helen and the visitor were to make a match

of it. A very rich gentleman, Elise says, and a very handsome, free-handed one. She does not consider Miss Brooke looks well ; but attributes it to the weather, and thinks matrimony a cure for all disorders. It may, or may not, be a sovereign remedy," concluded Miss Prince, demurely, pushing her cup away and folding her gloved hands in her lap. " It's impossible for me to give an opinion, for I've never tried it."

" The name—the name, my dear !" urged Mrs. George ; thinking that it would be more merciful to put Philip out of his pain at once. " You keep us all in suspense, while you withhold the only part of your news [that can enable us to judge whether this gentleman is an eligible match for our lovely neighbour, Miss Brooke, of Bridlemere."

" It's very odd," returned Miss Prince ; " the name had quite escaped me, and I never recalled it till that child mentioned it just now. The fortunate gentleman is a Mr. Multiple. From London, I understand ; a partner, I imagine, in some great banking-house. Very suitable in 'point of years, and devotedly attached to the lady. It is a most desirable match ! "

Philip sat quietly to be operated on. Something told him this was coming all along. He had learned, surely enough, though I cannot tell by what means, how a person of that name, young, wealthy, fashionable and handsome, had become a frequent visitor in the house which contained his treasure. Something had often warned him that this must be the end; and now, why was it so painful, since he had anticipated it long ago? Probably, because, however much Hope may be cut over and trodden down, she is never utterly destroyed until grubbed up by the roots. He bore the knife, though, resolutely and without flinching. When the surgeon runs his instrument into a flesh wound to keep it open, lest it heal too rapidly, we turn our faces to the wall, and set our muscles, and nerve ourselves against the well-meant infliction; so, when our hearts are probed in careless gaiety by dear, unconscious friends, we summon all our pride and all our endurance, and steel ourselves to bear, and never wince nor quiver while the iron seems to enter into our souls. Philip Stoney was but a ruined brewer after all; yet he was capable of self-devotion and self-sacrifice, such as we ascribe, on somewhat slender

grounds, to the era of chivalry, and possessed, moreover, that leavening of romance which lies deep in the characters of most Englishmen, and is so seldom permitted to appear on the surface.

Had he known Multiple to be a good man and true, I believe he could have merged his selfish feelings, and forgotten his own disappointment in Helen's welfare. I believe he could have borne to see her happy with another, and been even thankful for her sake ; but what he could *not* bear was, that she, his treasure, his ideal, and his pride, should knowingly throw herself away on a man whom, if she had loved, she would not have been the Helen he adored.

Mrs. George read his thoughts, and was sorry for him ; more, she interposed to save him further torture, by rising from the tea-table, and so promoting a general break-up. Her good intentions were, however, anticipated by the return of Doctor Blair, who stood like an apparition in the doorway, with an expression of grim contentment on his remarkable features. Dot jumped up incontinently from under the table, and seized his bony hand to pull him in.

“ What news of the patient ? ” was inquired, in

chorus, by all the tea-drinkers; Miss Prince adding, on her own account—

“ I am sure there is hope, Doctor, by the favourable expression of your face ! ”

Blair sat down, and shook his head gravely.

“ There’s a nurse at wark, yonder,” said he, “ to beat the whole College o’ Surgeons all to rubbish, and they call her Dame Nature. The lad was sensible a while syne. He’s a wise-like lad, you, and gotten a fore-arm like a smith’s ! His heed maun be as hard as whinstane ; but ye’ll obsairve that whan Dame Nature kens the brain is worth the trouble o’ presairvin’, she’ll no’ forget to hap it up in a gay stout box. I’d be loth to ‘trephine’ the lad, whilk the ignorant tairm ‘trepannin,’ for he’s maist oot o’ danger the noo. A’s no tint that’s in hazard, ye ken, or Miss Dot here would gar us greet baith sides our mouths ilka day in the week. Na, na : I’ll no ‘trephine’ the lad, ’gin he’ll pull through as he stands.”

“ Do you consider him out of danger ? ” asked two or three voices simultaneously, in the weak expectation that any doctor would answer such a question point-blank.

“ I’m no’ by ony means oot o’ danger mysel’ ! ”

replied Blair, gallantly, "with twa such braw leddies at my side, no' to speak o' little Missie here on my knee. But the lad's progressin', progressin' slowly, but favourably. He wandered a wee thing at the first, whan he cam' round; and he's been anxious syne, just aff an' on, an' awfu' taken up about a doag. He canna rest for thinkin' about his doag, puir fallow; an' I was just forced to humour him and tell him we would ha'e the beastie advairtis'd."

"I hope you will keep your word," said Philip. "He'll not get well half so fast if he's lost anything he sets his heart on; and your skill, Doctor, will not get half the credit of his cure."

"Hoot, fye!" replied Blair. "There sma' skeel in mending siccan' a clout in the pan as yon! I'm no' sayin' but what he's been corrackly treated, though it's not possible to go wrong in cases like these wi' a healthy subjeck. I promised him, natheless, Mr. Stoney, just to ease his mind; an' noo I'll see an' comb oot a bit advertesement, just to keep touch, ye ken."

Doctor Blair sat down accordingly, at the instance of his two hostesses, both of whom were naturally bursting with curiosity, and proceeded to

write out an advertisement for the next day's *Times*, couched in the following words:—

“LOST, in the immediate neighbourhood of Short Street, Strand, between the hours of twelve and two o'clock, yesterday, a rough black and grey Terrier, of the famous Castle Cropperton breed. Whoever shall bring the same to the barman of the Dog and Donkey Tavern, Strand, will receive a reward. The terrier is perfectly domesticated, and answers to the name of ‘Tatters.’”

“Tatters!” exclaimed everybody in a breath, as the Doctor, not without pride, read out this choice and discreet composition. “Tatters!” and they looked at each other in utter bewilderment and surprise.

“Ay, Tatters!” repeated the Doctor, with strong displeasure. “What na like name’s you for a doag? If they called him Wallace, now, or Mungo, or even Dawvid, there might be some sense in them. But Tatters! It’s no’ wise-like!”

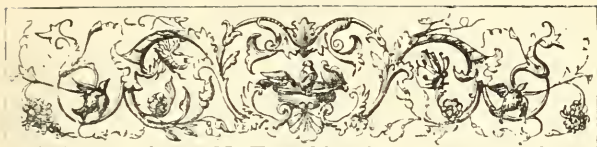
“And this is a *young* man, you say?” interrupted Philip, eagerly. “A man of my age or less, and a little taller, with brown hair and ruddy face, and strong active figure?”

“I’ll no’ say much for the colour in his face,” answered the Doctor. “Ye ken depletion works as quick most as a lick o’ white paint: but he’s a

braw lad, like yersel', mon, wi' a bonny curl in his locks, and a pair of shouthers that might ha' served Saumson Agonistes. I'm thinkin' this lad's no' been that far from the Pheelistins himsel'."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Philip. "It *must* be Jack Brooke! What can have happened? How came he here? Surely there's nothing wrong at Bridlemere? I'll go and see him this instant!"

"You'll *no'*!" replied the Doctor, laying his strong, bony hand on the young man's shoulder, and holding him by its pressure forcibly down in his chair. "He's takin' a sleep, and whan he waukens the morn, we'll ken whether he'll live or dee. See an' help to redd up the tea-things, mon. There's Miss Prince lockin' the cookies in the press. Whan ye're sorted, mem," added the Doctor to his landlady, gallantly, "I'll be happy to tak' a hand at the cartes wi' ye; an' I'll wager a baw-bee with Miss Dot, that she canna keep still for mair than five consackutive meenits on the clock!"



CHAPTER VI.

HIGH PRESSURE.

WHEN Pounder had disposed of the wounded man in his next-door neighbour's house, and found himself deserted by his partner at the earliest opportunity, it may be supposed that he reviewed the doings of the day with feelings of considerable apprehension and disgust. It seemed an ugly business enough, whichever way he looked at it. Should the sufferer die, which was by no means improbable, there existed, he well knew, a form of justice to be observed, called an inquest; and even when verdicts are satisfactory, jurymen often make unpleasant remarks on facts of which they disapprove, as revealed by the evidence. Then, at the best, supposing coroner and all

believed the story of the fit and the fall against the top step in the passage, these twelve intelligent Englishmen would probably demand a view of the premises; and what awkward questions might not be put to him, Pounder, as to his profession, means of livelihood, general character, and antecedents? which conscience reminded him would not bear examination. It was hardly possible but that much must transpire, which it was his interest and hourly endeavour to keep secret. Again, suppose the surgeon's evidence repudiated the notion of a fit (and the money-lender, a quick-sighted man enough, remembered the expression of Blair's countenance when that affliction was suggested as a cause for the accident). Suppose, on cross-examination, it should turn out that Multiple had been present in the house, though he affirmed to Blair he had only been passing the door. Suppose the workmen in the adjoining building should have heard or seen something of the scuffle, two against one; and suppose the jury should return a verdict of ——— Oh! that was impossible! absurd! He would not allow himself to think of it. The man would be sure to recover. People did not die of a crack on the head. This

fellow, too, was as tough as a prizefighter; he could not but allow that, when his partner came to help him, he was getting the worst of it; and he was no chicken, he knew—had been one of the best men in London, either with or without the gloves, at five-and-thirty; and used to think he could wrestle a bit even later in life than that! No—of course he wouldn't die; but what then? Except as a hanging matter, his recovery would be almost as prejudicial to them as his death. It would blow the whole connection to the devil!

Here was a young man, an eldest son, with whose family they had done business, whose antecedents and position were perfectly well known to them, half killed in their own office, under broad daylight, by the acting partner himself (for, of course he, Pounder, must bear all the blame), in a disgraceful *fracas* about a bill. Why, the *Times* would take it up, and the *Morning Post*, and all the Sunday papers, not excepting *Bell's Life*, which would devote a leading article to the affair, as being somewhat in its own line. What would be the consequence? Young spendthrifts would avoid a den of usury, in which they were subjected to ill-usage besides exposure; fresh paper

would cease to float into their strong boxes; old customers would extricate themselves at any sacrifice from their clutches; and all the brisk trade they had been doing would be diverted at once into the jaws of Haman.

It was no pleasure having a garden at Balham, even a fortnight earlier in its vegetation than last year, while involved in such a labyrinth of difficulties as these; and Pounder confessed to himself, for once, that he was beat, and that it would take a wiser head than his to decide what should be done. He seldom consulted Multiple on matters of business; for that gentleman usually so arranged, as that his partner's share of responsibility should only consist in seeing his own instructions carried out. There was a stringent general order, too, against bringing Short Street, under any circumstances, to Mayfair; in other words, Pounder was expressly forbidden to visit Multiple at his lodgings, near Piccadilly.

In an emergency like the present, however, the former decided that any breach of established discipline was permissible, and calling a cab he proceeded westward to take counsel of his partner, in a high state of perturbation and dismay. From sheer

habit he carried the umbrella in his hand that dealt the final blow. Its horn handle had been actually splintered by the force applied. Pounder's heart failed him when he observed a single hair from Jack's brown head adhering to the weapon, and while he plucked it out, a blush of honest shame crimsoned his broad face at the remembrance of the scuffle and its results.

The money-lender's predilections were all in favour of a fair stand-up fight, and the bare notion of foul play was extremely distasteful to his sympathies, natural and acquired. Till he married, and settled at Balham, he had been what is termed a "sporting man" about London, frequenting "sets-to," matches against time, pigeon shootings, dog-fights, and such congenial conflicts, professing one and all to be open and above-board tests of endurance, strength, and skill. Their theory, at least, admitted nothing in the shape of treachery, or unequal odds; and while their honesty was of a very questionable kind, its limits, though widely extended, were never avowedly overstepped.

Pounder was better adapted for an old-fashioned outlaw than a modern swindler, although in his

case, as in many others, education and his partner's example had done much to engraft a fair stock of cunning and hypocrisy on his original brute strength and rough, resolute nature. He was thoroughly discomfited now, and feared that he could not, as usual, shake off his business recollections with the first shriek of the railway-engine. Even at Balham he felt too surely he must be haunted by the doings of the day: the recollection of his defeat; the interference of his partner; above all, the labyrinth of perplexity in which the whole affair was involved.

While his cab-horse slipped and scrambled, and stumbled up the Haymarket, he reflected that nothing but Multiple's extraordinary cunning and wealth of resources in emergency could save them from shipwreck in the present crisis.

"He's soft," thought Pounder, who hated him heartily enough, "and selfish and luxurious, I know. I don't even believe that he has got a grain of pluck in him, when he's fairly tackled; but his headpiece is a good one, I must allow. The best I ever came across, or he'd had it broke many a time by now. That headpiece will pull us through once more, I'll answer for it. I shall

go easier down to dinner when I've had my instructions, and see my way a little clearer out of this infernal mess!"

Prepared to be consoled, he jumped out and rang the bell. "Was Mr. Multiple at home? He must see him directly, on business of importance."

The servant knew Pounder by sight perfectly well. "He was very sorry, Mr. Multiple was not at home—had gone out early—expected him back every minute. Sure to come in at dressing-time. Would Mr. Pounder step in and wait?"

Here was another difficulty. Pounder saw nothing for it but to comply with the valet's suggestion, and "stepped in" accordingly.

He might have waited all day, had his patience lasted, for Multiple was a score of miles out of town by this time, meditating his decisive stroke as he sat solitary in a first-class carriage, steaming down to Bridlemere.

The moment had arrived to play his last card without compunction; for if the game was not won and the stakes landed, before Jack Brooke's hard head recovered its consciousness, why the whole match must be lost, irretrievably, once for all. He rather liked the excuse for final measures;

rather enjoyed the prospect of putting the strong, painful, irresistible pressure on that haughty girl with her dark eyes, whose image haunted and goaded him like a curse; anticipated with morbid pleasure the probable scene, and vowed to have amends for the anxieties and humiliations he chose to persuade himself she had made him undergo.

Perhaps it is the pace at which we speed, suggestive in itself of abnormal energy and power, and comparative ubiquity, that makes things appear feasible when we travel by railway, though we considered them perfectly impossible before we took our tickets, and shall find them extremely difficult to accomplish when we have arrived. It has never been my good fortune to cleave the skies like Dædalus, or Mr. Glaisher, in a balloon; nor am I likely to do so, unless the "*Deus qui vult perdere, prius dementat*;" but I have no doubt that every man begins to feel a hero at an elevation of a thousand feet, and I fancy that for consciousness of capability, and a general conviction of superiority to his kind, as the horseman is to the pedestrian, so is the railway traveller to the horseman, and the aëronaut

to the railway traveller, though the last fly through space at the rate of sixty miles an hour, on the wings of the Liverpool express.

Multiple's brain was seldom idle, but it did not usually work so fast as now, while he traversed the wide green pastures grown lately so familiar, that told him he was approaching Middlesworth station. He felt none of the diffidence, none of the misgivings, none of the conflict of hopes and fears, half-cherished, half-repressed, that chequer the anticipations of a true lover in his meeting with her whom he has taught himself to esteem fairer, and wiser, and better, and harder to win than all the other daughters of Eve. He neither trembled when he thought of his princess, nor did his heart thrill, and his cheek burn to feel that every minute and every mile brought him closer to her presence; that nothing but the near horizon now divided him from the palace in which she lived; that yonder line of wooded hills was within the range of her vision as of his; that the very breeze which stirred the clump of leafless poplars at the station where he gave up his ticket would but dally with that half dozen of elms, a mile off on the height, ere it

passed on to whisper amongst the evergreens in Helen's garden, under her windows at Bridlemere. These are lovers' fancies, fond, foolish, yet engrossing for the time. Multiple was no fond, foolish lover, but a wooer—fierce, resolute, and not to be denied.

While the train slackened speed to glide into Middlesworth station, he clenched both his hands tight, till the costly rings he wore printed marks in his soft white fingers, smiling with the smile of one who has taken a prey for which he feels no pity, and got an enemy at a disadvantage to whom he will extend no grace.

Miss Brooke's walk was over just about the time Mr. Multiple's train stopped at its last station but one. Helen had paid her usual visit to Dame Batters, whose remarks were more inconsequent, as her rheumatism seemed more troublesome, than common. The girl entered her own garden with drooping head and slow, listless step. Somebody had compared her to a lily once, in Philip Stoney's hearing. It was long ago. She knew exactly how long, and could have named the very day of the month on which this exceedingly trite simile was proclaimed. She also

remembered how a young man in company had clandestinely gathered one of those spotless flowers soon after, and, too shy to wear it in his button-hole, had twirled it about between his fingers till the stalk broke. She had not forgotten how he picked up the head and put it away somewhere—probably in his pocket—with great care and secrecy, believing himself unobserved. And so he was by all but her. She was like a lily still; but a poor, faded lily now—drooping, forlorn, dejected; no longer the priestess of the garden and the pride of the summer's day.

She felt oppressed by one of those strange, dim forewarnings of evil to which we are subject all our lives, but especially in the sensitive season of youth. Forewarnings, that overshadow us with no kind of reason, and that arise from no phantom revelations of the future, but from the certain influence of the past. Medically speaking—not romantically—they are apt to originate in affections of the heart. Derangement of the liver, I suspect, and disorder of the stomach will also create these depressing sensations; but though often the effect of bodily ailment, a long course of mental anxiety is sure to produce them in their

most distressing form. If any particular misfortune happens to us, after one of these morbid attacks, we hold up our hands, and talk vaguely about mysterious affinities, and the wonderful presentiments of the soul. If, as is usually the case, nothing out of the common way takes place, we forget all about them directly; change of scene, or diet, or society, has drawn them from our minds.

Helen felt low and nervous when she went to dress. Sitting down before her glass, and looking on the lovely image it reflected, her thoughts flowed back in the contemplation of her own face, to him for whose sake alone she prized the beauty, which she could not but be aware she possessed. It was sad, it was humiliating, yet it was not entirely displeasing, to feel how everything now reminded her of *him*; and when she considered that soon it would be a crime to think of him at all, she felt justified in indemnifying herself by present rebellion, for the loyalty that must never again be shaken after the fatal day on which she had passed her word.

The maid, who had been with her young mistress in the nursery, and who was an execrable hairdresser, pulled, and parted, and brushed out

Helen's long locks, chattering volubly the while, with that happy insensibility to the low spirits of others, enjoyed by so many of her class. She was especially fluent to-night on Mr. John's abrupt departure, an occurrence sufficiently unprecedented to have occasioned many surmises below stairs, and condoled with Helen on the probability of her sitting down alone, in the event of his not returning to dinner.

No lady's-maid—even if she lived in a booking-office—would be likely to have the remotest idea of the time at which any train in the twenty-four hours was due at a station; and though people were continually arriving at Bridlemere by this method of transit, Helen's attendant entertained no more distinct notions of when, or how, or why they got to Middlesworth, than if she had resided in another kingdom, instead of the adjoining parish.

When, therefore, the grinding of wheels was heard outside, followed by an alarming peal at the door-bell, it never occurred to her that this was the most probable hour at which the young Squire would return by the quick afternoon train in time for dinner, having been up to London for the day.

She dropped one of Helen's long, black tresses, and nearly swallowed a great two-legged hairpin that she held between her teeth.

"Whoever can have arrived at this time of night?" exclaimed the handmaiden, it being a quarter-past seven p.m. "Master Walter isn't expected back from the barracks, for his things isn't laid out, nor the sheets on his bed, I know. Lor! Miss Helen, what *can* have happened? It give me quite a turn, it did, to hear that bell a-ringing so, when it will be as dark outside in half an hour as a wolf's mouth."

"You can go and see, if you like," said Helen, listlessly; "tell them to put off dinner till I ring, and mind papa's soup is ready for him at eight o'clock. I'll take it in when I leave the dining-room. Run and see, at once; I'll finish my hair myself."

Helen was too glad to be let alone, even by her maid, and having expected all day that Jack would return to dinner, to which meal, indeed, she would not have sat down by herself, was in no way startled by the noisy arrival.

Soon the handmaiden returned, breathless, and clasping her side, but with the beaming face of

one who bears tidings that cannot but be welcome—

“Oh, Miss Helen!” she exclaimed, “only think! It’s Mr. Multiple! We’ve ordered his things to Master Walter’s room, and he’ve asked me himself—and him looking so stout and well, to be sure—to tell Miss Brooke, with his compliments, that he hoped he might jine of her at dinner, and pay his respects to the Squire afterwards; and, oh! Miss Helen, I’m sure I’d better get out your pink tulle, and put flowers in your hair now.”

Helen, opposite the glass, saw her own face full, and its expression startled her. It reminded her of a girl taken along Piccadilly by a policeman one day when she was riding with uncle Archie. In a few seconds she thought she had grown like that poor, desperate, hardened girl. She smiled, nevertheless, scornfully and bitterly at the maid’s suggestion of putting flowers in her hair, and, rising at once, proceeded hastily with her toilet, that she might not keep her future lord waiting for dinner. Nevertheless, when she had almost finished dressing, and her maid was jerking the indispensable three drops of scent into a laced handkerchief that lay ready by her gloves, she did

not disclaim to put on two more rings and an additional bracelet, in honour of her unexpected guest. Because she hated the man, was that a reason she should not look her best, even in *his* eyes? As it is the soldier's pride and point of honour to preserve his steel untarnished, though shoes be worn and uniform in rags, the ammunition spent, the bread not come up, flanks threatened, and retreat cut off, so woman keeps her beauty bright and polished, even in the last extremity: and, though she must needs surrender it to the bitterest enemy, takes care to give it up without a speck to dim its lustre or detract from the value of his prize.

While the servants were in the room—and you may be sure that on such an occasion they did not in any way diminish the curiosity and surveillance habitually exercised by these familiars—the conversation was carried on pleasantly and good-humouredly enough. General topics, of a self-evident nature—such as the lateness of the spring, the uncertainty of the weather, the advantage of railways, and the health of the family—formed its basis, just as they did for you and your bride when you dined *tête-à-tête* the first day of your honeymoon, and might be supposed to have a few inte-

rests in common which would bear considerable discussion ; or, as they did that wretched evening, when you came down in your black dress to sit at the accustomed table, when the routine of daily life—interrupted while a certain room was darkened, and a certain awful Presence pervaded the house of mourning—had subsided into its usual channel, the servants handing successive dishes in established order, and the sad hearts present, vainly affecting to interest themselves in ordinary topics, because the one engrossing subject that pervaded them was too sorrowful and too sacred to reveal.

The dinner, as it seemed to Helen, was protracted to an unusual length, and yet much too soon over at last. Not that she herself did justice to its cheer, although Multiple, who was always a methodical person at dinner-time, and suffered nothing to interfere with his material pleasures, went very systematically through the bill of fare, and finished off with a glass of old Port, after cheese. When the dessert was put on the table, Miss Brooke rose, and muttering something about “papa’s soup,” excused herself from further attendance, on the plea that she always sat with the Squire for half an hour before he went to

bed ; so she sailed out of the room, more upright than usual, not, however, till Multiple, opening the door gallantly, with a bow and a flourish, chilled her blood by whispering that he “had seen the Squire himself for five minutes before dinner, who was prepared for everything, and approved highly of the measure !”

After this parting shaft, he rang the bell, ordered more coals, and sat down to his claret, with an appearance of complete confidence and contentment.

It was Helen's last chance. While she took her father's soup into the library, she meditated for an instant some such appeal as a daughter has a right, and, indeed, an obligation, to make. Her heart swelled when she thought of the fine, tall, handsome man she used to run to, with all her foolish fears and troubles as a child ; of the good-humoured voice that made light of her difficulties ; and the strong arm that tossed her little form to his shoulder—whence she looked down on the world, reassured, triumphant, and consoled. He would come to her rescue to-day, as he came when the brindled cow kept her prisoner in the orchard, or when her governess punished her un-

justly for one of brother Walter's misdeeds. It was only to go to dear papa, jump on his knee, make a clean breast of it, and everything was put right. Alas! dear papa had neither body nor mind now for helping her over a hard word to spell, or a high stile to climb. She remembered what the doctors said, that the slightest agitation might be fatal, and resolved that if *this man* had so far forgotten his promise as to have broached the hated subject, and really obtained the Squire's consent, why, the sacrifice must be completed. For her father's sake, and Walter's, she would endure without complaint—but it was base, ungentlemanlike, dishonourable of Mr. Multiple—and *this man* was to be her husband! The interview between father and daughter was of no long duration, and productive of no disturbance, at least to the former. Helen entered the drawing-room with a flush on her brow, and a flash in her eye, to meet her future lord. He had hurried her, he had mistrusted her, he had neither honour, nor generosity, nor common delicacy. It was horrible to hate him, but it was worse still to despise.

He was already settled in an arm-chair before

the fire. Brilliant in colour, faultless in attire, comely, lusty, and flushed with wine, his very attitude and bearing seemed suggestive of satisfaction and confidence in himself. He did not even rise when Miss Brooke came in, but put out his hand as she passed with a familiar gesture, as though inviting her to sit on his knee. She stood over against him on the hearth-rug, very angry—yes, I must admit that the gentle, good-tempered Helen was *very* angry, though she strove to speak calmly and without raising her voice.

“Is this generous, Mr. Multiple?” said she. “Is it fair or honourable, or even the common courtesy of a gentleman? You have no right to force yourself upon me when I’m alone like this—papa so ill, and my brothers both away. It’s infamous, Mr. Multiple—it’s a shame!—it’s too bad!”

“You look very handsome when you’re cross,” he answered with an insulting affectation of carelessness. “All you dark women do. But I wouldn’t advise you to give me too much of this sort of thing when we’re married, Helen. I’m a good-tempered fellow enough, but I don’t like curry for dinner every day. This, I suppose, is

only a lovers' quarrel, and you mean it to end in a lovers' make-up. Well, I'm agreeable: kiss-and-be-friends is a very pretty game for a winter's evening—*bien entendu*—when the two players are quite alone!"

How she wished for brother Jack's arms and shoulders now—nay, for brother Walter's much-admired ivory-handled sword. I believe that in either case something very like manslaughter would have been the result. It was little use, however, clenching those pale, slender fingers, and the nearest weapon of offence was only a sandalwood paper-cutter after all. What would somebody else say (somebody whose every tone, when he spoke to *her*, on the merest trifle, was between a prayer and a caress), if he could see her now? The thought softened her, and she continued pleading more mildly, with a little tremble in her voice, that betokened tears not very far off.

"At least, you should have given me time—you had my promise, and surely that ought to have been enough. When you know us better, Mr. Multiple," she added, forgetting from its familiarity the very chain that galled her to the quick,

“you will not require to be told that the word of the Brookes is as good and better than their bond.”

“I would not give much for the one or the other from some members of your family, Helen,” he retorted, brutally. “I know quite enough about their bonds, and the only word I mean to test is yours. Come, you’ve ridden the high horse quite long enough. I think it’s time for *me* to assume some of the authority of—of a husband, Helen—that’s what I mean to be.”

He thought she was cowed by his unconcealed disregard for her feelings, and that she only wanted “taking hold of,” as he called it, to give in. Of course, he drove her too far.

“I am not married to you yet, sir,” she observed, in a low voice, between her set teeth; “and it remains with *me* still to decide whether I shall ever become your wife.”

He wheeled his chair round, so as to look full into her face, and there was no less of bitter, malicious triumph in his eyes than in his voice, while he replied, “*Does it?* I think, perhaps you may find, my fine, resolute, haughty young lady, that you are not quite so free an agent as you suppose.

Look you here, Miss Brooke—or rather Helen, for, after all, you belong to *me* now; and if I choose to call you Helen, who shall interfere with me? Look you here, it's time for you and me to understand each other. I have got a pull over you, and I mean to use it. If you do not choose to fulfil your solemn engagements at my own time, and in my own manner—by Heaven, I'll make such an example of your boasted name of Brooke, that you'll hide your heads, every one of you, whenever honour is so much as spoken of amongst the upper classes, or honesty amongst the lower! I mean it, I tell you, and I'll do it too, as sure as I sit here!"

"You threaten me!" she sobbed out, wild with fear, and hatred, and despair. "You threaten me! What can you do?"

"I can try Mr. Walter Brooke for forgery; that is what I can do!" retorted Multiple, whose temper was rising fast. "And if I cannot transport your favourite brother for life as a convict, I have proof under my hand that will drive him out of England, and debar him from the society of every honest man on the Continent, or elsewhere. Come, Miss Brooke, this is child's play. I don't want to

bully you, but you *must* know a man does not waste his chances when he enters for such a prize as yourself. That's the way to put it, isn't it? Be reasonable ; *je suis bon diable moi*—not such a bad fellow after all, only I mean what I say ; and no consideration on earth has ever yet turned me from an object I have resolved to accomplish."

The chain was too heavy, the pressure too severe—she could fight against it no longer, she was beginning to cry now, and a woman's tears are always the prelude to surrender.

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in such a sad, helpless voice as moved even Multiple to a certain measure of remorse.

"Be reasonable," he answered, "that is all I ask. Do not fly out at me, right or wrong, whenever you are in bad spirits, or a bad temper. We might be happy together, Helen, if you would only believe it. I think I should learn to be a better man, a different man altogether, if you could bring yourself to care for me a little. However, that will come. It *must* come, when we have known each other longer. Meantime, you have misjudged and misunderstood me. I am not here to-night to force my society on you, nor to take

advantage of your loneliness. Far from it; I came down in virtue of my present connection with the family to break a little piece of bad news, on which I kept silent till you had finished dinner, and before the servants, lest your father should by any chance learn what has taken place. It is bad news enough, but I trust there is no real cause for alarm. Your brother Jack——”

Helen gave a little cry, and sat down, looking intently in the speaker's face with her large dark eyes. He thought how handsome she was, and went on—

“Your brother Jack has met with an accident. Nothing dangerous, I honestly believe, but still a serious and unpleasant accident enough, which will prevent his being removed for some little time. He is in excellent hands, and has the best surgical advice. I took care of that. He does not like me, Helen, but still he is *your* brother.”

“Oh, thank you!” she murmured. “It was good of you. I am grateful. I am, indeed. Tell me what has happened. Tell me all.”

“Why, the fact is, you know, Helen, young men will be young men,” replied Multiple, in what he considered a confidential, domestic tone; “and

Jack, though he seems so steady, is no exception, I suppose, to the general rule. As far as I can learn, he went into an office near the Strand, belonging to a person with whom I have some slight acquaintance, for the purpose of raising money. Jack is an eldest son, you know, and your poor father's life is none of the best. I wish he had consulted me first; I might have been of service to him. However, that has nothing to do with it. Well, he seems to have had something like a fainting fit. I think I have heard him say he is subject to them in the spring—and falling, struck his head severely against some article of furniture, I believe. Nothing very alarming, after all, but still enough to keep him quiet for a day or two. I happened to be passing in the street when they were taking him to a doctor, and I need not tell you I never left him till I saw him made quite comfortable, and ascertained that he was out of danger, of course."

"Where is he?" exclaimed Helen, eagerly. "I must go and nurse him! Papa is wonderfully better. I might go up to-night."

She was playing every card into his hands. He could no longer conceal Jack's whereabouts, nor

was there any object in doing so ; but if Helen was resolved to constitute herself head nurse forthwith, how could the gentleman become more thoroughly established as one of the family, or the lady compromise her character more completely than by their journeying up to London together for that purpose on the morrow ?

“He is at No. 100, Short Street, Strand,” answered Multiple, frankly. “A comfortable place enough, with the best professional advice. You will now see, Miss Brooke, what injustice you have done my motives in coming down to-night. My intention was to take your place in attendance on your father, had he been worse, or, if that was unnecessary, to offer my escort to London to-morrow that you might join your brother.”

A bright blush, colouring her very temples, swept over Helen’s face while he spoke, succeeded by a deadly paleness. I cannot tell what communications may have been still kept up between the George Stoney and their old friends in Middlesworth, nor how Miss Brooke came to know Mr. Philip’s address, and the fact that he was lodging with Lady Julia Treadwell’s old governess. She had heard it, nevertheless, and it had not escaped

her memory. Her heart thrilled with happiness to think that she would at least see him once more, and then—a keen pang smote the fond, faithful heart to reflect how, and in what capacity, she must meet him again.

Multiple saw the blush, and the tender look in the dark eyes; he misinterpreted both, as was natural, and began to hope he might teach her to love him a little in time after all.

Perhaps this rendered him more gentle, more amenable to her wishes than he would otherwise have been. He made no objection to her early retirement, in consideration of their proposed journey, which it was agreed should take place immediately after breakfast. Nay! beyond a passing frown, and a smothered oath, he showed neither anger nor disappointment, when Helen, ringing for hand-candlesticks, adroitly bade him good-night in presence of the servants, thus avoiding any warmer leave-taking than the habits of society enjoined. Poor girl! She had not forgotten that first caress, which seemed still to fester on her brow; she shuddered at the idea of such another, loathing and dreading so her future, that she could even force herself to banish it from her thoughts.

He was well satisfied thus far. The game was going just as he wished. Of course there must be little difficulties, little hesitations, he reflected. Women were such fools! and never seemed to know their own minds; but the thing was as good as settled now, and after the journey to-morrow she would have neither wish nor excuse for delaying the ceremony that was to put an end to all this trouble and self-restraint.

He mixed himself a stiff glass of brandy-and-water, which he carried off to Walter's apartment, and, having made up the fire, proceeded to smoke one of his best cigars in a very contented frame of mind.

Helen's head was in a whirl. When she reached her own room and tried to look steadily at the difficulties before her, they seemed, as it were, to surround and hem her in, ere they crushed her beneath their weight. On one thing she was resolved! Nothing—no! nothing on earth should induce her to meet Philip, for the first time since that well-remembered parting, in the character of Mr. Multiple's bride. Poor fellow! he did not deserve it! Something told her how hard and heavy the blow would fall. It should not come

from her hand, if she died for it. Yet she must hasten to Jack. He was evidently very seriously hurt. Her place was surely by his side. What to do? Oh! What to do? Was it woman's curse that she must thus be eternally hemmed in by forms and customs, and never, though her heart was breaking, be allowed to act for herself?

Long after her maid left her she sat looking at the fire, thinking—thinking; but as the stable-clock was striking two she stole softly down-stairs, in a dark morning dress, with a travelling bag in her hand. She let herself out at the back door, and, I need not say, though the lock was stiff and the bolts were rusty, woke none of the men-servants sleeping on the ground floor for purposes of vigilance in case of alarm. Then she walked across the park to Dame Batter's cottage, roused that old woman, who took her at first for a ghost—disappointed, though re-assured, when convinced of her bodily presence—asked leave to sit by her fire for an hour, binding her solemnly to secrecy, and at dawn had taken her place in the early train that would reach London long before Multiple was up.



CHAPTER VII.

“NOBLER KING.”

THEM BATTERS, though a heavy sleeper at most times, partook, on the night in question, of the same restlessness that disturbed his mother's slumbers, and kept Miss Brooke watching so eagerly for the pale-eyed dawn. It was scarcely daylight in London, when a dismal and heartrending howl from Tatters caused him to start up broad awake on his ragged pallet, and to discharge horrible oaths at the corner in which a hairy little form could be vaguely discerned sitting on end, utterly broken-hearted and forlorn. Poor Tatters, in the recollection of his short life, had never before slept away from Bridlemere, and now to find himself in a strange place, with a strange man, uncertain

where his own master was, subjected besides to the indignity of a chain and collar, was a combination of misfortunes so crushing as to call forth a succession of the loudest and most dismal wails, appealing to all creation against the injustice of his fate. He would not eat, a plate of broken victuals lay disregarded by his chain. He would not drink, and had indeed immediately upset the saucer of dirty water provided for him, in his struggles. He gasped, he panted, he whined without intermission, and at stated intervals drew out one of the long, melancholy notes that now woke Jem Batters, and elicited from that reprobate no modified expressions of anger and disgust.

The dog-dealer was not altogether satisfied with his capture. All his life he had entertained a feeling of admiration for the young squire, and he almost loved him since he had seen him hold his own so well in the fierce wrestling-bout he witnessed from his place of concealment. It went to his heart to rob so tough a fighter of his dog, and if ever Jem entertained scruples as to the exercise of his profession, it was now, sitting up in the cold light of dawn, with a dry mouth, a shaking hand, and a sense of irritation and discontent at every-

thing in the world pervading his whole frame. He relieved his mind by flinging one of his boots at Tatters, with a profane injunction to be quiet. The terrier bit the missile through, and shook it in defiance, but continued howling more persistently than before.

Jem resolved to consult a friend in his dilemma, and for that purpose rose from his pallet on the floor, plunged headforemost into the shabby shooting-jacket that did duty for a counterpane, retrieved his boot, put a hat on his head, a pipe in his mouth, and so was dressed for the day.

Tatters, watching this toilet with the keenest attention, forbore to howl, earnestly trusting that a change of any kind would be a move in the right direction. The dog lay down when Jem left the room, with his mouth close to the floor, and his eyes fixed on the narrow chink below the door, as if he expected his master to appear at any moment through that aperture. He must have been disappointed when in half an hour's time his gaoler returned, accompanied by another gentleman as unlike Jack Brooke as possible.

Jem bore in his hands and hat the materials for breakfast, three-pen'orth of pork, some veal pie,

and a quartern of gin. He carried also a ginger-beer bottle with ink in it, a spectral steel pen, and a sheet of dirty paper. A literary effort was obviously pending, and Jem's friend afforded no assistance of the kind unless, as he expressed himself, "things was ready squared, a drain kep' handy, and linin' found!"

The gentleman on whose scholarly attainments Jem, in common with a large circle of acquaintance, placed implicit reliance, was an exceedingly smart and dirty personage, to whose profession his very remarkable exterior gave no clue.

He was short, swarthy, flat-nosed, and a good deal pitted with the small-pox; had beady black eyes, jetty ringlets, curling to the roots, more oiled than brushed, gilt ear-rings, and a scanty moustache. He wore a long, black, tailed-coat, in the last stage of decomposition, a red shawl handkerchief with white spots, apparently no shirt, drab trowsers, low shoes, and straps. To the inexperienced, he might have been a bird-fancier, a bill-sticker, a pickpocket, or a ship's steward out of place. To those who had studied more attentively the different industrial branches carried on in the lower walks of London-life, he represented

many an unfortunate and deserving object for the bounty of the charitable.

He was the daughter of a beneficed clergyman, in the Isle of Wight. He was the widow of a Crimean officer, reduced to the last stage of distress, by the failure of two commercial houses and a bubble bank. He was a Pole escaped from Siberia, and a Missionary, off whose person slices had been cut and eaten raw, by the Fee-jee islanders. He had a mother in a mad-house; a young wife attacked by paralysis, and a large family of children, with but one suit of clothes amongst them, boys and girls. He had invented a patent, and was waiting for the 500*l.* promised by Government; therefore only required a loan for immediate necessities, to be repaid on the fourteenth of next month. He was, in himself, a whole division of discharged soldiers, with pensions that had expired for unaccountable reasons, at unusually short periods. Nay, he was the mother of five children at a birth, all living, and all demanding large supplies of that maternal sustenance which could be furnished by substantial food alone!

Notwithstanding his Protean nature, and the

various characters he adopted with such facility, he represented in Jem Batters's garret, nothing more interesting than a smart, dirty, dapper, ugly little man of five-and-forty; known to the society he adorned, by the name of "Nobler King."

Breakfast, laid on a soiled pocket-handkerchief, soon disappeared. Tatters was offered a morsel of veal pie, which, possibly recognizing the presence of his natural enemy, the cat, he smelt at and declined. Then Jem took a pull at the quartern measure, coughed, wiped his lips, and passed it to "the Nobler," who followed suit ere he proposed immediate application to business.

"Shall us draw it mild, Mr. Batters?" said he, "or shall us draw it strong? Is it somethin' to disclose of a appallin' natur, on receipt of a small sum in postage-stamps, to pay unavoidable expenses, from a well-wisher and a Friend? Or is it just the regular thing—Urgent distress—'Umble Supplication—Knuckle down—and grab wot we can get?"

"The Nobler" spread his paper on the rabbit-hutch, smoothed it out with his greasy coat-cuff, and winked solemnly at his employer.

"It's on my mind about the dawg," answered

Jem uneasily. “’Taint in my buttons to keep the dawg. He’s a *beautiful* toy-dawg, too, Nobler, —ain’t him? The chap’s a good chap as owns the dawg, an’ he shall have him back, so he shall, free-gratis for nothin’.”

“Nobler King’s” eyes twinkled. It seemed a good joke to hear Jem Batters talk about returning the stolen animal without payment; but professional etiquette forbade him to interrupt the meditations which it would be his part to comb out into an involved, eloquent, and ill-spelt appeal.

“Tell’ee how it is!” exclaimed Jem, bringing his fist down on the rabbit-hutch with an emphasis that bounced the cork out of the ink-bottle, and drew a sharp, angry bark from Tatters. “This here’s wot I call a game, this is! an’ I’d as soon be shot of it as not, mate. ’Taint the dawg, bless ye, ’tis the chap as owns the dawg, wot beats me in this here game. There’ve been murder done, Nobler, or next thing to murder, anyway, an’ I’ve a-been a what-d’ye-call afore the fact, I have, an’ I ain’t a goin to keep dark, I ain’t, not if they was to hoffer liberal. Ten cooter, we’ll say, and ’arf paid in advance!”

Jem paused—reflected—finished the gin, apparently in absence of mind, much to Mr. King's disgust, and then following the wisest course with a professional adviser of any kind, made a clean breast of it, and related to his companion the struggle he had witnessed, the foul play that had proved fatal to one of the combatants, and all the circumstances under which he obtained possession of the dog.

“Nobler King” ruminated deeply. This, he was of opinion, seemed a case for a threatening letter, and on that peculiar style of composition, he especially prided himself. The two laid their heads together for a long consultation, nor indeed could they arrive at any definite conclusion, till another measure of gin had been sent for, and consumed at the visitor's expense.

Under this additional stimulant, with much care, repetition, and forethought, the following epistle was concocted for the extortion of money from as unlikely a person as could have been selected in the whole of London, viz., Mr. Pounder, of the firm of Multiplé and Pounder, Short Street, Strand:

“MR. POUNDER—SIR:

“HONOURED SIR, this from a Friend and Well-wisher, who was at the time a Witness also whereby you are deceived in thinking that your Cruel rage and bloody, barbarous doings can lie unbeknown, Mr. Pounder.

“Sir, it was broad daylight, and he saw you strike the young Man down, likewise the Hum-brellier what directed the Fatal blow, and can swear the same truly in this court. You ought to know, honoured Sir, as murder never go Unpunished, and if you will send three shillings and sixpence in postage stamps to the address herewith you will greatly oblige a Friend; and if i had not respected of you this would not have taken place; and so no more at Present from your Well-wisher.

“If two half-crowns was payable more convenient, i can swear easier to the Other, him as took off directly as the coast was clear.”

Jem Batters grinned with intense approbation, while this production was read aloud. It comprised, in his opinion, all the elements of grandeur. It was vague, awful, mysterious, indefinite. At

the worst, he opined, it could not but bring back three shillings and sixpence in postage stamps; nor was he without hope that its mixture of threat, promise and persuasion, might produce, by return of post, the more liberal offering of hush-money comprised in the two half-crowns suggested by the last clause.

“Nobler King” saw that his composition was appreciated, and determined to work out a plan of his own that had been forming in his brain ever since he sat down to breakfast opposite Tatters; and had been struck with the correct points and general beauty of that hirsute and high-bred little dog.

The sheet was folded, wafered and directed, not very legibly, to the proposed recipient. Jem suggested a further outlay of one penny, for a postage stamp, ere he dropped it into the nearest letter-box. “The Nobler” shook his head in manifest disapproval of this unnecessary extravagance.

“A pen’orth o’ baccy would do us a sight more good,” said he; “and wot’s the use of your paying the Queen’s flunkies, when you can wait upon yerself. Here, ketch hold—take and drop

it in at Pounder's door. The walk will do you good, man, and I'll stay an' take care of the dawg till you come back.

Now this arrangement of his friend's was calculated to extricate Jem from another difficulty in which he was placed by the surreptitious possession of Tatters. The dog was so shy and strange in its new position, that he hardly liked to take it with him, for fear it should slip its collar and make its escape in the street ; while, on the other hand, to leave so valuable a fancy article unprotected at home, was a temptation to which he had rather not subject the honesty of the neighbours, particularly with so bad a lock as that which fastened his crazy door. He brushed himself up a bit, therefore, by the simple process of lacing his boots and turning his hat hindside before, ere he sallied forth on his errand, leaving “Nobler King” with a yard of clay in his mouth to keep watch on Tatters, till his return. A trust fulfilled by that worthy in the usual manner since the days of Diomed ; of which more anon.

Jem Batters proceeded without delay in the direction of Short Street ; but so much time had been consumed in the discussion of breakfast and

the composition of the missive he carried (for greater safety) in his hat, that it was near noon ere he reached the money-lender's door. Here he dropped his note stealthily through the aperture provided for that purpose, and hastened up the street to return down the other side, and cast wistful glances at the house in which he knew Jack Brooke was lying wounded, suffering, perhaps insensible, or even dead !

Jem's knees knocked against each other when he saw the blinds down in the front drawing-room ; a precaution taken indeed to prolong the slumbers that heralded the patient's recovery ; but which Jem, with a confused notion of obituary manners and customs, interpreted as a signal that all was over. His heart failed him, and he shrank with natural cowardice from ascertaining the truth he dreaded ; turning homewards at once, and revolving as he went, whether, if Jack Brooke had really no more use for him, he was not justified in making what he could out of his dog.

Thus it came to pass, that at the corner of Leicester-square, Jem nearly ran into the arms of Sir Archibald Brooke, walking with a stout, fresh-coloured young man, whom it was not difficult to

identify as Mr. Ragman de Rolle. The latter, who had imbibed the greatest possible veneration for his friend's uncle, had called thus early on the old soldier, to ask his advice in the purchase of some saddlery, and Sir Archibald, dearly loving and thoroughly understanding everything appertaining to his favourite animal, the horse, readily accompanied the subaltern through a long and minute inspection of saddle-trees, blankets, valises, wallets, holsters, stirrup-irons, head-stalls, tiger-skins and shaving-brushes—all the gaudy paraphernalia appertaining to the equipment of a mounted hussar.

After a morning so spent, it was but natural the pair should light their cigars and saunter westwards, with an eventual prospect of luncheon at “The Rag.” The young hussar was spending his fortnight's leave between “Returns” in London, and made the most of its every moment. No pedestrian in strong training did harder work than honest Rags in the pursuit of pleasure. It was severe enough formerly, when he contented himself with the easy dissipations and convivial amusements of his club; but now that he aspired to become one of the great world, and to frequent

a grade of society brightened by such ornaments as Lady Goneril and the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, why, not only did the bodily fatigue become excessive and exhaustive, but the wear and tear of mind was beginning to print little marks about his eyes, and to fade the rosy colour in his cheek.

The unexpected sight of Sir Archibald brought Jem Batters back at once to his former self. All the superstructure of knowing London worldliness and, slang street-born assurance melted away at the first glimpse of that kind, familiar face. The old feudal feeling, the sentiment of clanship, not yet quite extinct amongst the country peasantry of England, gained its accustomed ascendancy, and, Jem never knew exactly how or why, he found himself standing in the middle of a crossing, with his hat off, asking Sir Archibald's pardon; and, while he shrank from the soldier's keen eye, pouring into his attentive ear an incoherent tale, from which it only seemed clear that Jack Brooke had been murderously attacked by a person named Pounder, and was now lying dangerously wounded, if not dead, in a lodging-house, No. 100, Short Street, Strand.

Sir Archibald's adventurous life had taught him

to extract no less speedily than correctly, the salient points of a perplexed and exaggerated narrative. He had dealt heretofore with panting aide-de-camps despatched by infuriated generals to require impossible reinforcements at a critical moment. He had examined frightened peasants, caught, collared, and cross-questioned, with a pistol at each ear, and elicited an approximation to the truth out of their stammering *patois*. He had even sifted the evidence of native Indian purveyors, and more than once fished up a grain of fact from a whole bushel of falsehood, overlaid with all the trope and metaphor of Oriental eloquence. Also, on several occasions, generally under a galling fire from the enemy, it had been his lot to do duty with officers of all ranks, whose method of getting out of a mess was the issue of contradictory orders, with a storm of personal abuse, accompanied by oaths unfit for publication. He was, therefore, pretty well accustomed to go quietly, coolly, and by the shortest way, to the information he wanted to gain.

In a few minutes he had learned the precise hour at which his nephew was attacked, the residence of his assailant, and the place where he

lay. Also his informant's own address, extorted unwillingly, and only on the strongest compulsion. Then he thought for a while, determining to ask no assistance, at least for the present, from the police; reflecting, that if necessary, he could so describe his informant as would enable justice to lay hold on him at any moment; whereas, if this should turn out to be some foolish, young man's brawl, there was no occasion to make it public; and so concluding, put half-a-crown in Jem's willing hand, and turned with a calm face and a courteous apology, to take leave of his friend.

But staunch Rags was not to be thus shaken off. "I didn't mean to listen," said he; "but I couldn't help hearing. I can't tell whether I've learned more than you wish me to know, but as far as I can make out, Jack Brooke seems to be in a difficulty. They're great friends of mine, the Brookes, and—and—you've been very kind to me yourself, Sir Archibald. I'm not a talking chap, you know; but I feel these things. I do indeed. There's nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be of service to any of the family. Two heads are sometimes better than one, Sir Archibald, even when there's as much difference as

between yours and mine. There's a bother of some sort, I'm sure. I should take it as a great favour if you would allow me to see you through it!"

Sir Archibald knew, nobody better, how to distinguish between the conventional politeness of an acquaintance, and the unshrinking loyalty of a friend. He grasped Rags warmly by the hand.

"You're a trump!" was all he said. "I know I can depend upon you. I'll tell you what it is, De Rolle, I shouldn't mind having two or three fellows like you at my back, if ever I went soldiering again."

Then the two linked arms and walked off to Short Street, without another word; the younger man very proud and happy, because of his senior's commendations—for Sir Archibald's compliments were precious from their rarity, and it may be that Rags, with the keen enthusiasm of youth, rated his companion even more highly than he deserved.

In the meantime, Pounder, comparing himself, with a grim smile, to an old spider watching in a corner, sat at his knee-hole table in an exceedingly uncomfortable frame of mind. He had

taken his troubles down to Balham the day before, and they had poisoned the whole happiness of that pleasant retreat for him all night. He could not even work them off in the garden at day-break; and when he reached the office to find no news of Multiple, no directions how to act, they assumed a magnitude that completely cowed and overwhelmed him. He had ascertained by inquiry next door, that the patient was still alive. He could elicit nothing more decided from the maid-of-all-work, who, like her species, delighted in generalities; and this was the only scrap of consolation he could get. Ere he had thoroughly digested it, however, he received the threatening letter that represented the joint abilities of Jem Batters and Nobler King. This mysterious production only added to the multitude of his perplexities.

One thing alone seemed clear—that the ship was wrecked, the helm abandoned, and it behoved him now to shift for himself. He had no feelings of regard for his partner, very little *esprit-de-corps* connected with the business. Mutual interest alone had held it together, and the only principle acted on by both its heads throughout, was to

take care of Number One. Pounder began to think he had better throw his partner over, and make terms for himself.

He speedily ran through a rough calculation of his debts to Mr. Multiple—debts, that is to say, for which he was legally liable, considering that of a few trifling temporary advances, not so stringently secured, it was, as he whispered softly to himself, a waste of time to make account.

The legal debts amounted, however, to a large sum, though not quite beyond his reach, if he chose to incur great personal sacrifices for that which he felt now to be a question of personal safety. He was aware, also, that the two bills he held, or at least one of them, was valued very highly by the Brookes as affecting the honour of their family. It would, doubtless, fetch a proportionate price, and he felt justified, under existing circumstances, in making terms on his own account. Altogether, he was actually debating whether it would not be advisable for him to communicate at once with Sir Archibald, whom he knew by name and reputation, when on answering a knock at the door, that his ear

told him proceeded from no policeman's or detective's hand, he found himself face to face with that gentleman and his friend.

They had inquired at the neighbouring house how the patient was getting on, and, more fortunate than Pounder, had seen Miss Prince in the passage. She whispered to them that her charge was asleep, and they discreetly withdrew at once to prosecute their researches next door.

Pounder backed civilly before his visitors into the very room in which the conflict had taken place. He affected, of course, to ignore the motives of their presence, and rubbing his hands blandly, as usual, remarked that "it was a fine growing morning for the time of year; and he never in his life remembered money so tight in the City."

Sir Archibald took a good survey of his man, measuring him, as it were, morally and physically with his eye. What he saw in no way deterred him from the straightforward course it was his nature to adopt. He accepted the chair offered him, drew it close to the table, and looked Pounder full in the face.

"You are a man of the world, Mr. Pounder,"

said he, “and so am I. I know you, and I dare say you know me. We can trust each other in a matter of plain sailing, where it is the interest of neither to deceive. I have a bargain to propose.”

Pounder smiled.

“Sir Archibald Brooke, I believe,” he observed, with a courteous bow. “Money matters connected with the family, I presume? You are aware, Sir Archibald, that our clients rely implicitly on our honour, and that these affairs are conducted in the strictest confidence. Is this gentleman a relative, may I ask, bearing the same name as yourself?”

The old soldier dissembled his impatience, though the words “honour” and “confidence,” in Pounder’s mouth, irritated him to the last degree.

“This gentleman’s name is De Rolle,” he answered. “Mr. de Rolle, Loyal Dancing Hussars. He is an intimate friend of mine, and the business on which I am entering has nothing whatever to do with either honour, or confidence, or secrecy.”

Pounder resolved to make the best of it now, and was indeed rather pleased with the turn things had taken.

"This gentleman's presence," said he, "much facilitates matters between us. I shall have the satisfaction of consulting you both, as men of honour, on an affair of the utmost delicacy. I presume I can rely on your assurance that it goes no further than this room."

Sir Archibald was no swearer in general, but he came out with an oath now.

"—— it all, sir!" he exclaimed, "you talk as if you were an officer and a gentleman, with the honour of a whole regiment confided to your keeping! Come, sir, let us waive all this absurdity, and speak in plain English. I know enough to send you to hard labour, if not over seas as a convict, within two months from this time, if I choose to divulge my knowledge, and produce a witness who saw everything that took place in this very room only yesterday. You are liable to be arrested now—at any moment, for conspiracy, if not for manslaughter, and you carry it off, sir, by Heaven! as if you were a general of division at his own headquarters."

Pounder liked fair fighting best. He was neither annoyed nor intimidated at the other's tone; on the contrary, he felt it a change and a

relief to have to deal with an honest man, who meant what he said.

“I am glad you take my candour in such good part, Sir Archibald,” was his temperate reply. “What took place in this office yesterday was no fault of mine. Your nephew, a fine, athletic young man, Sir Archibald, endeavoured to possess himself of certain papers, by force, and in our joint resistance—for my partner, Mr. Multiple, happened to be in the next room—I regret such necessary violence was used, as has been productive of very serious consequences. My partner, Sir Archibald, is a man of violent temper under excitement, and your witness—if witness you have, though, of course, I do not dispute your word—will have informed you that Mr. Multiple struck the decisive blow. I am pretty strong and active,” added Pounder, looking down at his own stalwart person, with some satisfaction, “and could have protected my property for myself, without resorting to such desperate extremities.”

There was no resisting the man’s frank, good-humoured manner, while he spoke. Both the visitors began to conceive a better opinion of him than they entertained at their first entrance.

Sir Archibald had winced, visibly, when he heard Multiple's name mentioned, though he was more vexed than surprised, for Pounder's information only corroborated certain grievous suspicions he had long entertained, and the skeleton in his cupboard at present was the frequency of such a man's visits to his niece at Bridlemere.

Nevertheless, he put all this aside for future consideration, and proceeded at once with the business in hand.

"We understand each other, Mr. Pounder," said he. "Tell me all you know; I'll make it worth your while. I think we ought to be able to come to some arrangement without requiring the magistrate's warrant, after all."

Thus adjured, Pounder related, simply and truthfully enough, the circumstances that led to Jack Brooke's casualty, as they occurred, coming by degrees to the point at which the two corresponding bills had been produced, and evolving very cautiously his own suspicions of foul play, if not forgery, on the part of the gentleman by whom these compromising documents were drawn out.

"In all my business experience, Sir Archibald,"

he continued, in a tone of deep feeling, and with an air of the utmost frankness, “I cannot call to mind a similar occurrence. Mistakes, indeed, often happen with young men, who are eager, hurried, and ignorant of detail; but such a mistake as this seems so awkward, so unfortunate—what shall I say?—so deplorable, that I am only speaking the feelings of my innermost heart, when I declare it was distressing to me, as it is incomprehensible. It would be a great object, doubtless, for the sake of all concerned, that both these bills should return into the possession of the family—should, indeed, be taken up, and destroyed without an hour’s delay. I have them here in this room, in my own keeping, notwithstanding Mr. Brooke’s bold and dashing attack yesterday; but I am scarcely justified in parting with them, even for the highest considerations, without my partner’s consent; and you will see our difficulty, Sir Archibald; do we not run a great risk of rendering ourselves amenable to the laws of our country by compounding a felony?”

Shot after shot he poured into the old soldier, sitting upright in his chair, paler and paler, as he took every charge without flinching; but who

groaned at the final missile as if it had reached the seat of life at last. The honour of the Brookes was to him a question of faith and worship, little short of a religion, and every nerve quivered with shame and anger, while the horrible suspicion dawned on him more and more clearly, that his brother's son had been guilty of so foul a deed. Well! if the family honour lay a-bleeding, they must throw a cloak over it, were it of cloth of gold! Sir Archibald set his teeth hard, and spoke out so calm and distinct, that Rags looked round at him astonished.

"Name your terms," said he. "Fill up a cheque here on this table. I pledge myself to sign it with one hand, when the bills are put in the other."

Our friend Rags, although in a general way detesting very cordially anything approaching to business, and when fairly collared half-yearly by his own agent, yawning lamentably during the whole interview, with every mark of disgust and inattention, had listened eagerly to the foregoing dialogue, as though it poured in a stream of light on much that had hitherto been dark, mysterious, and inexplicable. He had sidged a good deal in

his chair, looking from Pounder to Sir Archibald, ready, impatient, yet waiting his opportunity to strike. Now he started up, to the intense astonishment of both, and laid his hand forcibly on the latter's arm.

“Hold on,” said he. “You are making a long rigmarole about nothing. Perhaps I can explain this matter clearer than either of you.”

Pounder wished nothing better. He anticipated now the proof positive of all that he had suggested, and an offer of hush-money from Sir Archibald, that would make him independent of his partner for life.

He produced the bills from the drawer in which they were locked away, and spreading the earlier in date on the table under its indorser's eye, asked solemnly :

“Mr. de Rolle, is that your signature?”

Rags examined it attentively, and nodded. He could have sworn to it with a clear conscience, therefore was his affirmative very quiet and unmoved.

Pounder took the second bill, to spread it out in the same impressive manner.

“And this?” he asked. “You will observe the difference. Is this also your signature?”

“Yes,” exclaimed Rags, vehemently, blushing at the same time all over his honest cheeks and forehead. “I backed poor Walter’s bills for six hundred altogether, and if they’re due, I’m ready to pay the money up now. Cheque on my banker—drawn here—Pounder or bearer—Multiple or order—anyhow you like to have it!”

It was perhaps the first lie Rags had ever told in his life. Though he blushed so red during its delivery, he was not in the slightest degree ashamed of it, nor indeed, if falsehood can ever be justifiable, had he any reason to be so.

Pounder’s chin fell to his watch-chain. Sir Archibald was not deceived, but he shot a grateful glance at his young friend, that would have gone straight to his heart, had Rags not been looking out at window, with a transparent affectation of complete indifference and content.

Pounder was the first to speak. He saw the great game was up, but true to his professional instincts, he also discerned no contemptible pickings to be gathered off the wreck.

“The bills do not fall due,” said he, “for nearly

a week. It would, perhaps, be advisable to purchase them from me at something less than the full amount.”

He spoke to willing listeners enough. When Sir Archibald and his generous young friend walked out of Pounder’s offices, Walter Brooke was no longer in danger of detection. Moreover, Helen’s uncle, by a judicious appeal to Pounder’s self-interest, had prepared an additional weapon or two, both offensive and defensive, against the man to whom Helen had plighted her word that she would be his wife.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE LADIES' MILE.



NOBLER KING, left to his own devices, smoked out his yard of clay with great deliberation, ere he proceeded to the corner in which poor Tatters continued to bewail his captivity. Then he turned his cuffs back, pulled a brush from his pocket, and taking the dog between his knees with professional dexterity, dressed him over from end to end, entirely regardless of the little animal's growling protestations and vicious struggles to get free. When he had thus arranged the terrier's toilet to his satisfaction, he completed his own with the same instrument—first his hat, then his hair, then his coat, and so prepared himself for supervision by the great world. He next inflicted a good deal of

unnecessary discipline on his victim, till the animal shrank against the wall sufficiently cowed and subdued, in which state he left it alone for about five minutes, shutting the door after him as though he did not mean to return, but bursting in and releasing the captive when at the last stage of despondency, and thus presenting himself at its need in the light of a liberator and a friend.

Tatters now agreed to be carried under "the Nobler's" arm without resistance, and the two journeyed in this fashion all along Pall Mall, up St. James's Street, past White's window, in which nothing was as yet visible but a pair of large grey whiskers, a glossy hat, and the broadsheet of *The Times*, and so by the south side of Piccadilly to the corner of Hyde Park. Here "the Nobler" put his burden down for a minute or two, but without letting go of the string which secured it, to rearrange his own hair and neck-cloth very carefully under the clock. It was five minutes past one, a beautiful spring day in the first burst of the London season, and already the Park was full.

I can remember, nor is it so very long ago, when the busy people, who have nothing to do, paraded,

horse and foot, with the utmost regularity in that promenade which is called Rotten Row, once in the twenty-four hours, at 5.30 p.m. This daily walk or ride seemed sufficient in those idle times for all purposes of air, exercise, and conversation; but the Anglo-Saxon energy of to-day is not so easily satisfied. We like to "go in" for our London season now, as we do for our other pleasures, "tooth and nail." We meet our dear friends, whose name is legion, each one of whom to know is to love, and none of whom ever bore us in the least, at a nine o'clock dinner, where we are packed as neatly as the present costume of the nation will admit. Just before we begin to get pleasant, it is time to go away, but our regrets at parting must be consoled to feel that in another hour we shall all be together again, on a staircase, jammed so close, perhaps, as to have no room to breathe; but still, delightful thought, in proximity to those whose conversation never fails to raise our spirits and improve our minds. Torn from these blissful scenes—and I appeal to everybody over five-and-twenty whether an announcement that the carriage "stops the way" is to be confronted as a calamity, or welcomed as a release—how delightful

to reflect that in six hours at most it will be time to rise and breakfast, in order that by noon we may be ready dressed and prepared at all points to meet the same people again. After luncheon, however, we can exist without them for a space of nearly three hours; but we are back in the old place to look for them once more, by six o'clock, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

It is this ceaseless repetition which renders the pleasures of a London season, though vastly amusing and exciting, no doubt, somewhat exhausting, and indeed monotonous, to persons of only average energy and good spirits.

"Nobler King," however, who possessed more than his share of both these advantages, and was, besides, in his own degree, a thorough man of the world, looked on the gay, brilliant, parti-coloured scene that met his eyes in the Ride with every mark of scientific interest and critical approval. To a "cad" about London, who knows every celebrity, man and woman, perfectly well by sight, who is also acquainted with a good deal of their private history, that they hardly know themselves, it is more than amusing, it is positively instructive, to watch the gorgeous figures shifting here and

there in the human kaleidoscope. He knows, or thinks he does, why that gentleman on the Arab has made six short turns, only a quarter of the way to Kensington gate, and why that lady in the bright coloured habit, with all that beautiful hair, will come leisurely down at a walk on the Knightsbridge side, so as to meet him, quite by accident, under the trees. He knows how that fine-looking man, on a thousand guineas' worth of horseflesh, cantering the treasure so deftly in all the triumph of equestrian skill, has two bills out that he is at his wits' end to meet, and will stand or fall on the settling day of next Derby, by the issue of the great race. He has an eye to perceive, too, that the rider in cloth boots, who looks and is a man of wealth and substance, affects to be anxiously seeking a friend for whom he waits, because his thoroughbred hack, with its tail tucked down, declines to move one step further in an opposite direction to its own stables. He knows what this wonderful Amazon, the boldest of the bold, gave for the perfect creature she rides so beautifully; how it is bred, where she bought it, and who is to pay for it. He knows the pet name of that pretty pony, as of the titled little lady it carries, and of

her three tall, handsome sisters on their tall, handsome horses, in charge of dear papa, a stalwart nobleman not less than sixteen stone, all scouring along at speed, talking and laughing in the highest possible state of health, spirits, and good-humour. He knows, too, though nobody else does, the real name of this elaborate individual, seen every day riding at a foot's-pace, faultlessly dressed, superbly mounted, holding communication with no man, and supposed by the laughing young critics who hang over the rails and remark on the cavalry as they pass, to be a tailor's showman, a pickpocket in disguise, or an escaped lunatic. He is, in short, perfectly conversant with the persons, horses, carriages, names, titles, follies, extravagances, and vices of the aristocracy, no less than with the attempts of the numerous class beneath them to imitate their superiors in those matters which are least worthy of imitation.

"Nobler King," therefore, feels himself to belong, in a manner, to the gay world, and walks across the Ride, holding Tatters under his arm, with none of the diffidence that renders this passage an awkward and painful ordeal to quiet country clergymen, or respectable squires of many

acres, who are unaccustomed to the bustle and publicity of metropolitan life.

Mr. King is not without acquaintances here and there, of his own class and profession, but etiquette seems to forbid mutual recognition for the present ; and although he was drinking with that sodden-looking gentleman at his elbow till two o'clock this morning, a scarce perceptible wink of the near eye is the only greeting vouchsafed. The sodden-looking gentleman, who is encumbered with a poodle in a blue ribbon, a King Charles spaniel in a string, and two toy terriers in his waistcoat, makes no sign whatever. He has remarked Tatters, notwithstanding, and recognising his friend's versatile talents, observes approvingly within himself, "This is one of 'the Nobler's' games, this is. Never said nothink to me, nor nobody, he didn't. He's a deep 'un, 'the Nobler'—a precious deep 'un. He's as deep as a tailor's thimble, he is."

"The Nobler's" profundity, however, being an incontestable question, no further notice is taken of his movements by the sodden-looking gentleman, who pursues his own way amongst the nurses and children on the grass, while Mr. King, curling his

ringlets about his eyes with his unoccupied hand—for he cherishes the delusion that he is an exceedingly good-looking man, and much admired by the female portion of our aristocracy—proceeds along the shaded walk, which at this hour is crowded with the prettiest dresses and the prettiest faces in Europe, and where to-day, for the first time in the season, not a chair is to be had for love or money.

The ladies have come out in high force and unusual numbers. Like snails after a shower; nay, rather let me say, like roses after rain, they are taking advantage of the bright spring sunshine to add a gleam to their petals, and a shade of deeper colour to their bloom. It is the first real fine day they have had, and their light summer dresses look fresh, and pure, and delicate as the blossoms in a cherry orchard. Parasols are up, of course, and there is, indeed, glare enough to warrant a general display of this defensive apparatus, which I have, nevertheless, often observed unfurled under the darkest skies. The tender green leaves gleam and quiver over a thousand dainty heads in their transparent little bonnets. Slender feet, encased in kid and bronze, rest lightly

on the dry white gravel. Eyes are glancing, hands waving, tongues going, gossip reigns supreme, while the men who let the chairs walk to and fro, exulting, though serene, since all are occupied, and all are paid for, wooden, wire and canework, from end to end.

Amongst the different groups that formed the entire mass of good looks, good manners, and doubtless good intentions, I have endeavoured faintly to sketch out, there was one, consisting of three people huddled gracefully together under a tree, that attracted "the Nobler's" attention; in common with most other occupants of the Ride, both horse and foot. Innumerable looks were directed at this little party from eyes that could shoot rays nearly as bright as its own. Innumerable hats, constructed by the best makers, were flourished in its honour; and many a generous steed, with sensitive mouth and severe bridle, felt himself pressed up to his bit once more, for the hundredth time, because his rider would fain pass before this trio to the greatest advantage.

Comments, polite though ill-natured, were made on it in every tone by every observer, and the buffoon of the hour constructed in its honour an

elaborate jest on the spot, for the amusement of his male audience, which witticism, however, when diluted for feminine ears, was found to have lost its point, and to be neither laughable nor appropriate. Two of the group were perhaps two of the prettiest women in London, the third incontestably one of the dullest noblemen in the Upper House.

Nevertheless, they seemed perfectly well satisfied with each other as they sat.

The Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil had quite recovered her cold, and was permanently established at Caradoc House, Circus Square, for the London season. Her grace had been a great promoter of the "early Park movement," and was indeed a staunch admirer of all out-of-doors amusements. I am certain I met her once at Cremorne, behind an exceedingly thick veil, on Merthyr-Tydvil's arm, but I do not think she liked it; and after she had seen him shoot the chamois that scours over its perennial hill at the end of the tube, and knock the cushion that tries your fighting powers into the middle of next week, she had quite enough, not caring to stay for the fireworks, but well satisfied to get her duke back into the

brougham, and drop him at Pratt's to finish his evening in less questionable society.

The Park, at noon, however, suited her grace's taste to a nicety. She could bring little Caradoc here in the shortest of frilled trousers and the brightest of velvet jackets; also his papa, when not otherwise engaged (the latter was, at the present moment, sculling his heir-apparent about on the Serpentine); and she could chaperon Lady Julia too, who had taken a great liking to the penny chairs at this hour of the day, and for some inscrutable reasons of her own, never rode Cockamaroo of late till five o'clock p.m., and then very often gave him a good gallop in the country. She was apparently thinking of that favourite horse, or some other very engrossing subject, even now, for, although her eyes and her talk sparkled as usual, she relapsed into occasional fits of abstraction, lasting for several seconds at a time, during which she seemed profoundly unconscious of her companion's presence, and not half so much wearied as was natural by the conversation of Lord Mexico.

I suppose a *real* bore is the person of all others who has the least notion what a bore he is!

Nature seems to have provided plate armour for him within, as she has for the rhinoceros without. To say that he is impervious to a hint expresses nothing. He is invulnerable to the most stinging sarcasm, as he is insensible of the most pointed rebuke. A barb that would quiver in anybody else's flesh drops from his coat of mail, foiled and blunted, at his feet. It is one of his peculiarities that his voice never varies in its harsh, undeviating, regulated monotony, but is always out of tune in exactly the same degree. Nobody ever knew a bore with a cold or sore throat, or such accidental impediment to the exercise of his vocation. He is in capital wind, too, habitually, and does his work without the slightest symptoms of distress. When fastened on his victim, there is even a severe beauty in the order and method with which he fulfils his task. That he is a calamity of no trifling calibre, I concede, but I am willing at the same time to hope that he teaches us many useful, social lessons—such as forbearance, self-restraint, and the art of swallowing grievous and protracted yawns with a smooth face. Lord Mexico found small reason to complain of incivility or inattention from his listener,

and believed himself, no doubt, to be an eloquent and agreeable man.

He was engaged at present in describing a young retriever to Lady Julia, who sometimes listened and sometimes did not, but made no scruple of cutting across his conversation with irrelevant remarks of her own whenever the occasion prompted an interruption—Lady Goneril's ball, at which they had all met within the last twelve hours, affording a subject for at least five minutes' serious discussion.

"They are curly and sagacious, you know," proceeded his lordship, drawing circles in the gravel with the point of his cane; "and come to heel at once, with scarce any breaking, but you must be careful not to speak too harshly; and if ever you lay your hand on them——."

"They spoil your dress to a certainty, my dear," said Lady Julia to the Duchess. "I shall leave off altogether, I think, unless the ball-givers can produce a better set of dancing men. I had room enough last night, I allow, but, literally, not a partner who could keep time except one, and he was a conceited minx, at home from Eton for his sister's marriage. I liked the pluck of the thing

asking me, so I waltzed with him, and he waltzed very well. Mind you have Caradoc taught before he goes into long stockings, dear!"

"Carry takes after papa, and can do everything!" answered the Duchess good-humouredly. "Now, I thought it was a *capital* ball. I'm sure I was so stiff when I came down to breakfast, I could hardly put one foot before the other."

"In stiffness after severe exercise," continued Lord Mexico, with a dry, unmoved voice, as if he was reading Colonel Hawker's instructions to sportsmen, "I have found it a good plan to chafe the limbs gently with the hand before my sitting-room fire; and my keeper quite agrees with my suggestion, that, when every other remedy fails, nothing does so much good as——"

"A ball again to-night, and another to-morrow, and mamma's muffled drum, as I call it, to-day from five to seven!" yawned Lady Julia wearily. "What a bore it all is, dear! I think I must be getting too old for society. I've a great mind to take up politics: the dullest men seem interested about that; and I could *coach* papa famously with the Blue Books. Well, there's one comfort: no-

thing ever *can* be so stupid again as Lady Goneril's ball last night!"

"Hush!" exclaimed the Duchess. "Here she comes. My stars! what a bonnet!"

The bonnet thus apostrophized was indeed nodding slowly down the walk, poised on the lofty roll of Lady Goneril's magnificent hair. It's wearer had tired of her author some weeks ago, and was now chiefly occupied with what she called her duty to society. This conscientious state of mind prompted her to endless balls and parties on her own account, as well as to attend those of her numerous acquaintance, so that her life was one of incessant motion; and although still exceedingly handsome, she was paler and thinner than when she visited Norman's Cross from St. Barb's.

The same spirit of sacrifice to those inexorable Furies, *Les Convenances*, bade her insist upon poor old Goneril hobbling about, arm-in-arm with her, whenever his gouty feet would permit; and this nobleman, who was good-nature personified, though he had done exactly what he liked best for forty years, found himself in his old age subjected to a course of severe discipline and exercise such as he had scrupulously avoided all his life.

Though very well hatted, wigged, dyed, cravatted, and girthed up, he trotted along, somewhat ruefully, by the side of his tall, handsome wife, and only brightened a little when he caught sight of Lady Julia, who was an immense favourite with all old gentlemen of the superannuated *roué* school. "She was so clever," they said, tapping their antediluvian old snuff-boxes with their wasted old knuckles. "Such manner, such tact, such *savoir-vivre*, and such a little devil with it all, that it was positively quite refreshing to sit next to her!"

He mumbled out an unintelligible compliment on her good looks, and she accorded him her hand with far greater cordiality than she would have shown to a younger and more appropriate gallant. Lord Mexico had not yet thoroughly broke his retriever, he had only now arrived at the stage when it is advisable to accustom the dog gradually to the sight and sound of a gun. Lady Julia had almost forgotten he was there.

The Duchess and Lady Goneril exchanged compliments about last night's ball. Then the latter turned to the younger lady, and told her how beautiful she looked on that occasion.

“Your dress was per—fection, my dear,” said she; “and I assure you everybody said you were *the* ornament of my room.”

To which Lady Julia demurely answered, “That is a very high compliment, for it was a most charming ball!”

“So good of you both to come,” replied Lady Goneril, passing on with a smile and a bow, to repeat the same sincere dialogue with the next group, and the next, and the next, all the way down, till the old lord should stop dead lame before they quite reached Apsley House. But long ere this the subject of the ball had been forgotten by our trio, and Mexico had brought his retriever to the point at which he thought fit to puff off small charges of powder in its ears.

Presently no less a person walked by their chairs without recognising them than Mr. Ragman de Rolle, puffing absently at his cigar.

Rags was very much pre-occupied, and very unhappy. Had it been otherwise, he would have glanced shyly about in search of his few acquaintances, appealing to them for nods of recognition, and blushing painfully while he passed under the batteries that range so formidably along the whole

of "the ladies' mile." To-day, however, he was too miserable to care for ridicule or encouragement. His idol, you see, had fallen, and he could not see it up again. He had hitherto considered Walter Brooke the pattern of all that a gentleman should be ; and now that his eyes were opened, he longed painfully to be in the dark once more. It seemed so completely a matter of course to honest Rags to have saved his brother officer's worldly reputation at any sacrifice, that the consciousness of having done so gave him not the slightest pleasure. He dreaded meeting him again, he dreaded going back to the regiment, he dreaded the horrible power he now possessed over the man whom he had hitherto regarded as so superior to himself. Altogether, Rags had never felt less comfortable than when he entered the Park on the present occasion. Had he stayed away altogether, I do not think he would have been very generally missed. In the whole gathering, I doubt if he knew a dozen people by sight ; but it was part of the routine of his London day to ride or walk twice in the prescribed locality, and here he paraded accordingly.

Lady Julia's quick eye caught him long before

he approached. She whispered something to the Duchess that made her laugh.

“If Rags cuts me to-day,” said this incorrigible young woman to her friend, “I tell you, once for all, up goes the sponge! What is the use of my having been so admired last night, and broken poor old Lord Goneril’s heart by my “get-up” of this morning? What avails my obedience to you, my chaperone; my patience with this—this ill-broken retriever on my other side; my popularity with the wicked in general, if I am to be defeated here on my own ground by Rags? No, Duchess; he shall *not* escape. Fire a gun, dear, as we say at Cowes, and bring him to.”

Thus adjured, the Duchess executed so graceful, marked and cordial a recognition as could not elude the subject’s notice. Rags started, blushed, clutched desperately at his hat, and brought himself up, very awkwardly indeed, but with obvious enthusiasm, in front of the two ladies.

Diffidence, when it springs from sincere reverence and admiration, cannot be very displeasing to women; and I believe shyness in ours, partly perhaps from its rarity, is much prized by the other sex. The Duchess was extremely kind in

her greeting, and Lady Julia, who, ever since the morning poor Fugleman was killed, had taken a liking for Rags, became almost affectionate.

“Had Mr. de Rolle been long in town? Why did he never come to see them? They were always at home for luncheon. Would he come to mamma’s afternoon to-day—any time between four and seven? Where was he staying? He should have a card directly she got back. Was he still quartered at Middlesworth? How was the dear old county looking? Had he been over to Tollesdale? Could he tell them any news of the people at Bridlemere?”

Rags winced. Even this flattering interest, real or assumed, was powerless to console him. He answered vaguely and at random, he fidgeted from one foot to the other. When the Duchess dropped him some gracious platitude he went down upon his knees with but little eagerness to pick it up. Altogether, though obviously flattered by their kindness, he seemed relieved when the interview was over, and departed awkwardly indeed, but still with much alacrity, on his way.

“What is the matter with him?” said Lady Julia, as his figure disappeared amongst the

crowd. "I am sure by that man's manner he is not easy in his mind. How different from yours, Lord Mexico. I suppose if you *had* a mind you'd be as easy in it as possible. Duchess, you've a great deal to answer for; I don't think Rags has ever been the same since you danced with him at our Middlesworth ball. Wasn't that a good ball, Lord Mexico? I forget, though, whether you were there!"

"When my retriever is thoroughly habituated to all such sights and sounds," continued his lordship, ignoring the ball question entirely, "I then accustom him to observe the different modulations of my voice—anger, reproach, menace, expostulation, and encouragement, and his training——"

"Thoroughly destroys his ear for music, I should think," retorted Lady Julia, turning impatiently from his lordship to the Duchess, and adding confidentially in her friend's ear, "Do you know, I'm rather unhappy about Rags, that's what we call him, dear, in our part of the country. I've rather a weakness for Rags. He's a very honest, unaffected, good sort of fellow. Rags is unselfish; Rags is straightforward; Rags is sincere; there are not many people you can depend

upon like Rags; and——Good gracious! there's 'Tatters!'

The Duchess looked round in unfeigned astonishment, she thought her charge had gone mad; the voice in which Lady Julia spoke the last sentence betrayed deep emotion, while her cheeks and brow became scarlet. At the same moment "Nobler King" was passing immediately in front of their chairs, and his little prisoner, hearing its name thus pronounced in familiar tones, struggled hard, with starting eyes and panting tongue, to get free. The young lady half-rose from her seat, but controlled herself with an effort, and "Nobler King" strolled on unnoticed, not, however, till she had thoroughly satisfied herself that his unwilling captive was no other than Jack Brooke's favourite terrier.

Lady Julia, though she might sometimes speak unadvisedly, and in a hurry, was a person who seldom acted on impulse. She felt at this moment, too, that she needed all her self-command; for although the unexpected appearance of something associated with Jack Brooke had thus agitated her, she was extremely unwilling that her weakness should be

guessed, or her discomposure observed by her companions.

Ere the one had time to ask what was the matter, or the other to observe anything unusual, the colour had faded from her face, leaving her only a shade paler than before; and the pretty mouth had shut tight with the expression that always came over it when she made up her mind to a decided stroke. If that was Mr. Brookes's dog she would have it at any price, for its master's sake. If it was only an extraordinary likeness to the precious creature, why, she would have it all the same, and for the same reason. There is no proverb of more extensive application than "Love me, love my dog," and its converse.

"Nobler King," in the exercise of his vocation, could see out of the back of his head, like a woman. He knew, as well as she did herself, that the pretty girl under the tree, in the light sprigged muslin trimmed with apple-green ribbons, had taken a fancy to his charge, and though he might not be quite sure of Lady Julia Treadwell, he was perfectly familiar with the name and appearance of the handsome Duchess by her side. So he sauntered leisurely off the walk, amongst the horses,

and Tatters, peering over his shoulder like a child carried by its nurse, looked helplessly here and there in wistful eagerness to detect the face of a friend.

“Lord Mexico,” observed Lady Julia, turning carelessly to that nobleman, who had not even yet quite done with his retriever. “You have talked about dogs till I begin to think there *is* one subject in the world on which you are well informed, and even eloquent. I want a terrier, a rough one, very much: at least, Nethersole does, which is all the same. Don’t you think that is just the kind of thing over there? Not up in the trees! Good gracious! but there. The one that curly man in the Ride has got in his arms!”

Lord Mexico’s vision having been brought with some difficulty to bear on the animal in question, for he was one of those provoking people who, when warned of an object on the right, invariably look for it on the left, he expressed a qualified approval of its appearance, but showed no further interest in the subject.

“Go and tell the man to come here,” added Lady Julia, imperiously; “If it’s a well-bred one I’ll buy it, and take it home with me at once.

How horrified mamma will be when she sees it at luncheon !”

Lord Mexico hesitated ; he looked at his boots, which were thin ; he looked at the road, which had been watered into a delightful puddle, fetlock deep, for horses ; then he looked at Lady Julia’s delicate, sarcastic face, and rose to obey. Somehow people always did what Lady Julia told them ; and, muttering something about “worsted stockings,” he plunged into the morass, and tapped “Nobler King” on his unoccupied shoulder.

The strangely assorted pair stopped momentarily the whole stream of the Ride. Peers and peeresses diverged on either side, to the complete derangement of their pace and conversation. A general of cavalry had to make his charger change its leg at half a stride’s notice that he might avoid them. An amiable baronet lost both stirrups, his balance, and his hat, almost everything but his temper, from the suddenness with which he pulled up ; and an extremely dashing, solitary, *Bois de Boulogne* looking lady, in a velvet habit, relapsed so instantaneously from a *haute-école* canter to a butter-and-eggs trot, as to transform, with the rapidity of magic, a round, shapely,

flowing form of feminine beauty into a mere mass of pudding, quivering and shaking about in a bag.

“The Nobler,” however, maintained his position in dignified composure. He took off his hat and drew up his short form with the air of an old French marquis.

“Glad to see you, my lord viscount!” said he, with perfect assurance, and in a voice that might have been heard at the Barracks. “Your lordship looks well, but a little low in condition. London life, my lord, London life! It *must* tell. I find the same thing myself. Your lordship was good enough to oblige me with the loan of half-a-crown at Epsom Spring. If you happen to have seventeen and sixpence about you I could pay up at once in gold. It’s these small debts, my lord, that give a gentleman a bad name amongst the lower classes.”

“Go to the devil!” answered Mexico, impatiently, for he observed a whole knot of laughing idlers; amongst others the Duke of Merthyr-Tydvil, with little Caradoc on his shoulder, listening delighted to this harangue. “Go to the devil! you impudent vagabond. Or stay: there’s

a lady wants to look at your dog. Come into the walk with me."

"Since your lordship is good enough to offer me the choice, I will give you the precedence to which you are entitled over the other nobleman," replied "the Nobler," with undiminished affability, adding, "I shall have great pleasure in allowing your lordship to present me to any lady of your acquaintance."

This polite speech brought the Viscount and the dog-stealer in front of Lady Julia's chair. Tatters recognised her in a moment, making frantic efforts to extricate himself from his keeper's grasp, and the young lady herself doubted no longer that this was the same dog she had taken in her lap to caress that happy morning in the green lane.

She smothered a sigh, this wilful, prosperous coquette, and with it an intense longing to buy the beast at once for a hundred pounds, and take it in her arms, new dress and all, while she covered it with kisses. She began low, however, as she thought, in her bargaining, and remarked quietly, "That is rather a nice dog, though too long-coated for a lady. I will give you a sovereign for

him, if I can take him with me immediately, just as he is."

"Very sorry to disappoint your ladyship," replied "the Nobler," with the utmost deference; "but the dog is private property, and is not for sale."

Mr. King, you observe, had far too much tact to attempt with ladies the same grotesque buffoonery that he found answered his purpose admirably with the male scions of aristocracy, who encouraged and rewarded his impertinences. Such want of worldly wisdom would soon have destroyed the easiest and most lucrative branch of his profession, therefore his female customers pronounced him a "most civil and obliging person, who could always supply any kind of dog you wanted at less than a week's notice;" and not one of them but would have flown out indignantly at husband or brother who had hinted the possibility that the darling she mourned so bitterly last autumn, and all through the winter, had been abstracted and sold to go to Liverpool with Mr. King's full concurrence and advice, if not actually purloined by that gentleman himself.

"Not for sale!" exclaimed Lady Julia, with

rising colour. "Then, why do you bring him here? Where did you get him? What's his history? I believe you stole him!"

"I brings him here every day for a hairin', my lady," answered "the Nobler," bowing at every second word with the utmost politeness. "He belongs to a cousin of my own. A respectable tradesman, my lady; a man of some property. He's very much attached to the dog for its affectionate disposition and manners in the 'ouse. I never see a dog so gentle with children, my lady, along of being brought up with 'em; and broke to a drawing-room—leastways a parlour—wonderful! No, my lady, I don't think as my cousin could be tempted to part of Scamp. Tho' of course he's a man with a large family too. Scamp, my boy, it's time for us to be goin' home."

But Tatters answered in no way to the name of Scamp, and Lady Julia was more convinced than ever that it was the dog she thought. Moreover, though it might be supposed that Mr. King's dinner-hour was approaching, he seemed in no great hurry to depart.

"Five pounds!" exclaimed her ladyship, in a low, rapid voice, a little ashamed of the price, but

all her prudential resolutions disappearing before the contingency of losing sight of Tatters.

“It’s a bargain, my lady!” replied “the Nobler,” closing with so good an offer on the spot, and releasing his captive at once, who jumped without delay into Lady Julia’s lap, and whined and trembled with delight, licking her face repeatedly without finding its caresses repelled.

Lord Mexico looked on in astonishment, and the Duchess began to think there was something more than a mere case of dog-fancying in this costly and unexpected purchase of an exceedingly rough-coated terrier; but a difficulty now arose which was hardly to be expected in such a quarter: the five pounds was not forthcoming with which to pay for the dog!

Lady Julia did not of course go for a morning’s walk with a purse in her pocket. The two or three rings and one bracelet she wore might have been worth seventy or eighty pounds. Her handkerchief and parasol represented two or three sovereigns more; but of ready money she had not so much as a postage stamp, having actually paid for her own chair and the Duchess’s with two of those convenient little

government securities brought out for the purpose.

Her companion had indeed got her purse with her, but it contained only eighteen-pence, the Duke having borrowed all her surplus of silver to pay for his boat on the *Serpentine*. It was no use asking *him*. Merthyr-Tydvil never had a farthing in his pocket, as, how should he, with a generous disposition, a pack of fox-hounds, string of race-horses, and three country-house establishments, all on full pay?

Lady Julia turned round and appealed to Mexico. This nobleman's income was two-and-twenty thousand a year, paid quarterly, without deduction or drawbacks. He was virtually one of the richest men in London, had no town-house, and only a shooting-box in the country; could give five hundred a-piece for his horses, or his opera boxes, or anything he fancied, and laid by every year two-thirds of his income. But when Mexico came to turn his pockets out he could only muster seven and sixpence in silver, and two of the new halfpence that shine like brass. Mr. King was anxious for his money at once. He had an "appointment," he said, with a gen-

tleman in the City at two. He ought to be gone now.

Fortunately, at this crisis, Mexico caught sight of Young Overdue, an ornament to her Majesty's Household Brigade, with an allowance of two hundred per annum, and the tastes, accompanied by the liabilities, of a *millionaire*."

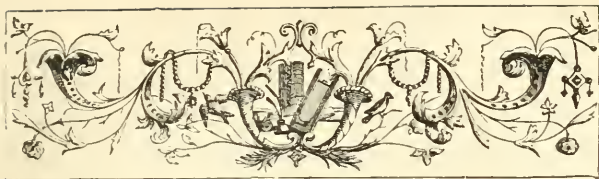
"Overdue!" holloed the Viscount; "can you lend us a fiver?"

"A hundred of them, if you like," answered the spendthrift, pulling out a roll of notes in a beautiful satin case embroidered with gold. "Take what you want. It's settling day at Tattersall's, so a few more or less makes no difference!"

So Lord Mexico, borrowing a five-pound note from the reckless young soldier, handed it to Lady Julia, who paid it away to "Nobler King" in exchange for Tatters, and although she punctually repaid his lordship within twenty-four hours, I think it very probable the Viscount forgot to reimburse Overdue, and I am sure the last never troubled his head about it again, one way or the other.

Having obtained what she wanted, Lady Julia grew very impatient to get home.

“You will come to luncheon with us, dear?” said the Duchess, who lived only two doors off. No! Lady Julia would *not* come to luncheon. It would make her so late. Mamma never went out the days of her “at homes,” therefore she could have the carriage early, and meant to go and see Miss Prince, her old governess, so she took leave of her chaperone on her own doorstep, and hurrying off to the dining-room with her prize, proceeded to give Tatters a most indigestible and injudicious luncheon without further delay.



CHAPTER IX.

JACK'S ALIVE.

THOUGH she travelled without a companion by ordinary mail-train, in a first-class carriage as yet unprovided with any startling apparatus by which to communicate her alarms and misgivings to the guard, Miss Brooke arrived safely in London, without sustaining insult or injury on her journey.

She was only very cold, pale and uncomfortable while she drove through the morning streets, in the noisiest of cabs, but had presence of mind enough left, notwithstanding her pre-occupation, to resist the driver's extortion when he set her down at Miss Prince's door, and to give him not much more than fifty per cent. over his legal fare. She felt strange, confused, wearied and anxious, yet at the

same time happier than she had been for weeks, and she certainly did wonder, as she entered the house, whether it was not possible that she should find Philip Stoney in attendance on her brother.

Could she have known that he turned the corner out of the street, about thirty seconds before she drove into it, I imagine she would have felt a good deal relieved and not a little disappointed.

There was no disappointment, however, in her meeting with Jack. He was up, he was out of danger, he was in a fair way for recovery. The strong family constitution, and the hard family head, had carried him through triumphantly, and there was nothing, so Doctor Blair said, to prevent his being on his legs again in a week, as well as ever he was in his life. This good news she learned immediately on her arrival, from Miss Prince, who wept copiously in imparting it. Mrs. George Stoney also, though by no means a weak-minded person, could not resist folding the young lady in a tearful embrace. Helen felt she was among friends, and, being comforted, consoled, relieved from the anticipation of a great affliction, cried a little, I dare say, too; but she stopped the

water-works before she entered the invalid's chamber, and only suffered them to play off quietly and in secret, while she looked out of window, after the first greeting with her brother was over, and she had satisfied herself of his thorough amendment and well-being.

Of course she insisted on becoming head-nurse immediately, unpacking her little travelling-bag, and pitching her tent, as it were, at the Front, without delay. Doctor Blair, entering the room, caught her in the act of smoothing her long, black hair at the glass over his chimney-piece. The tall, freckled Scotchman started, and turned so red that his whiskers paled by comparison.

Thomas the Rhymer, when he met the Queen of Faëry, guiding her snow-white palfrey through the gleams of the summer lime-trees with more than mortal grace—sweet-voiced; bright-eyed; glowing with beauty, and all a-blaze with gold, could not have been more completely taken a-back. Jack, lying on the sofa, laughed till his bandages came loose, ere he could explain her presence.

But if Blair was dazzled with the vision that had thus irradiated like a flood of sunshine the

gloom of his drawing-room floor, no less was he enchanted with the quiet dexterity displayed by Miss Brooke in repairing damages for the sufferer.

"I have been used to a sick-room all my life," said she, when the doctor expressed his surprise and admiration, "though I never had to nurse Jack before. If you will tell me exactly what you wish done, I think you may leave him to my charge, sir, as confidently as if I was one of your own hospital nurses."

"Hospital nurses!" repeated Blair, who knew the pattern well, lifting up his hands and eyes in vehement protest, "I'm thinkin' we'll none o' us get nursed by the like o' you in *this* world, an' I'm of opeenion, mem, that we'll no need nurses nor doctors neither in the next. What ye'll do, Miss Brooke, to-day, is just to tak' a bed in beyont, for s' long as it's your pleasure to stop. I'll see and ha'e the room sorted for ye this vary meenit. Whaur will I sleep mysel'? Oo! I've gotten a lawboratory in the hoos. I can aye rest the better when I ken I'm no far off my tools. Ye'll gi'e your brither yon bit doze in the phial 'gin he's wakin' in an hour's time. Gin' he's no, ye'll just pit it behind the fire! Fare ye weel, Miss

Brooke ; ye're a wise-like young leddy, an' I'm proud to get a grip o' your hand !”

So speaking, Doctor Blair departed to prepare his own sleeping-room for Helen, ere he went out to visit his patients, leaving her fairly installed and settled in a chair at Jack's pillow, for the latter had insisted on being dressed and moved to a sofa in the front room, under the impression that he would be able to leave the house and return home in the course of the day.

But though Jack thought, like other hardy, well-plucked individuals who are unused to illness, that because he was no longer in actual danger, he must, therefore, be quite well, his sister's experience took a less sanguine view of his condition, and she saw that perfect quiet was in this, as in all similar cases, the shortest road to recovery.

So she would tell him nothing of her own doings, and refused even to discuss with him the probability of regaining Tatters, a matter on which Jack's mind was a good deal disturbed ; but sitting within reach of him in silence, and busying her slender fingers with a bit of crochet-work, out of the travelling-bag, which only to look at was an

opiate and a sedative, she had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes shut, his head droop, and his whole frame relax in a deep, sound, healthy slumber that promised to last for hours.

The apparition of Miss Prince gesticulating in dumb show at the door did in no way disturb the patient, and Helen crossing the room lightly with her noiseless step, gathered from the little woman's pantomime and broken murmurs that it was her own and Mrs. George's opinion Miss Brooke must take some rest. For the furtherance of this object she had made and brought a cup of strong black tea, such as one might give a student who has been out of bed several nights to keep him awake yet another hour, and had placed it in the adjoining apartment for Helen's consumption. Here, too, the young lady found a large easy chair in which to repose her frame ; and here, with the door ajar, that she might watch her patient, Miss Prince left Helen, with an assurance, in a ghostly whisper, that none of the Stoneys, nor indeed any other inmate of the house, should disturb her solitude.

After the strong tea, sleep was of course impossible ; and the crochet-work, though she had it on her knee, did not make much progress. Helen

soon relapsed as usual into contemplation of the impossibility she resolved every day to think of no more. Jack's accident, and her own decided step in thus journeying unaccompanied to London, had for a time broken the thread of her customary reflections; but the anxiety of the one was happily over, and the excitement of the other had passed away with her arrival. The dull, familiar pain began to gnaw, as of old, relieved only by the prospect of seeing Philip Stoney just once more. A contingency that, while it added sharpness to the pangs, rendered them notwithstanding less wearisome and intolerable.

He might be in the house even now, she thought, perhaps only parted from her by the planking of the floor; yet, had it been so, he would surely have afforded her some token of his presence, could not have left her entirely unnoticed, like an utter stranger. Perhaps, after all, he had given her up, as she had him; perhaps he had not really cared for her so very much—he had never exactly *told* her so. Ah! that would be better for him, for both; and yet she could not bring herself to wish it. How wicked of her! No; though she might pray for it, she could not bring herself to wish it!

But it was not so—she was *sure* it was not so! In such matters there is a conviction deeper than all reasoning that accompanies the truth. She knew he loved her, just as certainly as she knew it was her duty to forget him henceforth. If she could see him she would tell him so. The pain would be over then once for all. Why was he away to-day of all days? Where could he be? What was he doing now?

What Mr. Philip Stoney was actually doing at the moment Miss Brooke's reflections brought her to this point, was hurrying back to Short Street, at the utmost pace his somewhat remarkable walking powers could command. He had been obliged to leave home for business, before Jack Brooke woke in the morning; but as he had never yet asked for a half-holiday from his employer, he found little difficulty in obtaining a remission of his duties for the rest of the day after dinner-time. Philip was the most considerate fellow in the world of other people's feelings, and he had learned through Blair the anxiety under which the convalescent laboured about his dog. He had employed the first hour of his spare time, accordingly, in seeking the haunts of sundry individuals

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whom he knew by sight in the streets, as belonging to the dog-fancying profession. In such research he had come across no less practised a proficient than Jem Batters, who, after a touching and penitent recognition, not without gushing tears, consequent on an overdose of stimulants, confided to him that he was himself in quest of just such an article as "Mas'r Philip" described. On comparing notes a little further, Jem "made a clean breast of it," with a few reservations in his own favour, and detailed the whole account of the murderous onslaught to which he had been a witness. Philip was quite satisfied that his friend had been the victim of foul play, though he little suspected at whose hands, and was now more than ever anxious for an interview, in which, if Jack was well enough, they should devise means for the recovery of his favourite, and the punishment of his foe.

Jem Batters, indeed, had declared confidently that he could lay his hand on this or any other missing dog in London within twenty-four hours; and had also expressed his readiness to identify the person of Mr. Brooke's assailant, and swear to him, if necessary, in a court of justice. Previous to

taking further measures, however, he wisely suggested that Tatters, with the sagacity of his kind, might have run straight back to the place at which he was kidnapped on escaping from captivity, and proposed, therefore, in the first instance, to accompany Philip as far as Miss Prince's house in Short Street before making search elsewhere. Thus it came to pass that the pair appeared at her door in the very moment when a smart and gaudy-looking gentleman, having rung gently at the bell, was endeavouring to ascertain whether Miss Brooke had arrived from the maid, who knew nothing, as in duty bound.

Multiple, I think I have already shown, was not a man to be easily foiled in an emergency. When he came down to breakfast at Bridlemere, ready dressed for his journey, he was doubtless startled, as well as angry, to learn that Miss Brooke had gone. He recovered himself, however, quickly enough, and dissembled his surprise with habitual cunning, avoiding any interview with the Squire, and leading the servants to suppose by his manner that he was aware of the young lady's movements, and had arranged to meet her at some intermediate station, and thence accompany her to her

journey's end. He did not of course say so in as many words to the butler who brought in the urn, or the footman who packed up his things, or the coachman who drove him to the station ; but each of these domestics nevertheless, as well as the whole household, including Helen's own maid, imbibed somehow this improbable version of the business, and became fully persuaded of its truth.

Multiple's knowledge of Miss Brooke's character satisfied him that she was just as sure to go at once to her brother as a wounded deer is to travel down-hill to the stream ; but it was necessary that he should make certain of her refuge in the first instance before taking further measures ; and though he had no desire to confront Jack Brooke, and a stronger objection still to the gaunt Scotch doctor who had questioned him so freely, he thought he might safely inquire at Miss Prince's door whether the young lady was within, and make it appear in this quarter also, that even if they had come up in different trains their intention was to travel down again to Bridlemere together.

The moment he set eyes on him, Jem Batters

recognised his figure. He caught tight hold of Philip Stoney's arm—

“That's the chap,” said he. “I'd swear his life away amongst a score on 'em. I'm not over fond of the Bobbies myself, Mas'r Phil; but you just ketch a hold on him—I'll have a peeler from round the corner to help us, in less than no time!”

Even while he spoke, Multiple turned to depart, having learned what he wished to know. The two men on the pavement cut off his retreat, and Jem advanced on him with more determination than that besotted person usually displayed.

“No, you don't!” said he, coming close up, as if to collar his man. “You're a nice party, you are. D'ye think I wasn't down upon your little game here yesterday? Aye, do, if you dare! If you lift a finger, I'll have every peeler in Bow Street down on ye, you thieving, murdering, dog-stealing blackguard—you!”

Multiple drew himself back, ready to strike if necessary, knowing what a fair blow he could get at an adversary who prepared to collar him and didn't; but recognising Philip Stoney, whom he had seen in Middlesworth, he thought it best to

take the high hand, affecting a tone of haughty surprise rather than indignation at the whole proceeding, as being less an outrage than a mistake.

“What does this mean?” said he, loftily. “Who, and what, is this drunken ruffian? May I ask, sir, as he seems to accompany you, whether he is acting under your orders, or on your behalf? Oh! I beg pardon—Mr. Stoney, I believe? You can doubtless assure this impudent fellow that he takes me for somebody else.”

The last sentence was spoken in a tone of admirably-acted surprise, subsiding gradually into a courteous appeal for that assistance which one gentleman naturally affords another. Philip, however, was not to be thus hoodwinked—

“This is an awkward business, Mr. Multiple,” said he. “I am unwilling to make a disturbance in the street, but I cannot lose sight of you till matters have been cleared up. I am surprised you should have come here!” he added reflectively, and more to himself than the other.

“I came here as an intimate friend of the family,” answered Multiple, putting a bold face on the business; “to offer my assistance to the gentle-

man who is lying ill up-stairs, and to inquire after Miss Brooke. Here she comes. If you disbelieve me, let her answer for herself; but in the name of everything that is courteous and gentlemanlike, send this ruffian about his business forthwith!"

Thus adjured, Philip, whose belief in the truth of Jem Batters' story was considerably shaken by Multiple's manner, as well as his own conviction of its extreme improbability, withdrew the latter into the passage, for they had hitherto been standing on the step, and shut-to the door, leaving Jem outside. Helen was already in the hall: she had heard voices in loud altercation, and fearful the noise might wake her brother, had come down to entreat the disputants to be quiet. Philip stood spell-bound. Multiple's appeal was no less unexpected than Miss Brooke's appearance at this juncture. Unconsciously, though, he interposed his own person between the young lady and her visitor. The latter was the first to speak—

"Miss Brooke," said he cheerfully, "you can bear witness to my identity. There has been some ridiculous mistake, but your presence sets everything right. Mr. Stoney will be satisfied with *your* assurance that I come here with the right of

one bound to your family by the closest ties—or, at least, very soon about to be so. Is not this the truth?"

Philip looked from him to her, like a man who awaits his sentence. She was quite pale, and even her lips were white. No sound came from them in answer, but one of her listeners, intently watching, could perceive that they syllabled a distinct affirmative.

Then Philip's heart died within him, and he cared little what became of Multiple, or Jem Batters, or Jack Brooke, or indeed anybody in the world. It was true then—all true! How could he have so deceived himself as to disbelieve it when he heard it first?

"I only called to say I was at your orders about returning," added Multiple, quite satisfied with the way in which he had got out of his present difficulty, and chiefly anxious now to secure his retreat. "We will go down together, when you think your brother well enough to leave him, Helen, unless you wish me to return to the Squire, and come up for you again in a day or two."

She found her voice now, and a very cold, haughty voice it was, while she replied—

"I shall write to Uncle Archie to take me down at once; and ask him to stay with us till my brother is able to come home."

Then she turned away without further leave-taking, and began to walk slowly and heavily upstairs. Multiple was gone in a twinkling. Philip Stoney stood under the lamp in the hall, and watched the folds of her dress rustling, step after step, towards her chamber. Already she had reached the first landing, and was turning to go on.

"Miss Brooke! ssai he, pale, half-choking, but stanch and true to the last. She stopped, and somehow, with one bound, he was at her side. "Miss Brooke," he repeated, "I know it all—I heard it yesterday. I am sure now it is true. My only wish is for your happiness. I *pray* that you may be the happiest woman in the world! God bless you!"

She gave him her hand, and when he took it a warm tear fell on his own; she sobbed out a return of his solemn blessing, and rushed away to the room she now occupied, at once. Had she stayed another moment she must have fallen in his arms, and told him then and there how well

she had loved him—so dearly, so long—and how she loved him still. There was no escape but in flight ; nevertheless, when she reached sanctuary, I doubt if she could write legibly or intelligibly to Uncle Archie, unless she checked the stifling sobs that rose so wildly, and dried the blinding tears that would not be controlled.

And this was the meeting to which these two young people had respectively looked forward so longingly ! that in all their unhappiness they had regarded as a definite point to which they must come sooner or later ; and that would surely, in some way or other—they didn't exactly know how—affect their future very beneficially, and enable them to bear their subsequent trials with exceeding fortitude and resignation. Nothing, a week ago, could have distressed either of them so much as an assurance that this interview was never to take place.

And what was its result ? A man walking aimlessly about the streets of the busy city, in the vain hope that change of scene and constant motion would take off something, were it ever such a little, from the burden of leaden, hopeless sorrow, that he seemed destined to carry to his grave. A

woman, sitting bowed over a writing-table, weeping, longing, wild, repentant, heart-broken, wishing only that she might die.

In the meantime Brother Jack was sleeping a sound, unbroken slumber, that, to use Blair's metaphor, kept the "bung in the barrel" more effectually than all the doctor's stuff the Latin language was ever corrupted to compound. The sleeping draught, directed to be administered in case he should wake, had not indeed been thrown "behind the fire," but stood untouched on the chimney-piece, his fine form lay stretched supine and motionless; the pallor occasioned by loss of blood was on his cheek, but his measured breathing announced the depth of his welcome and unbroken sleep. It was this regular breathing that first aroused Helen from the passion of grief to which she had given way. With every woman worthy of the name, the instincts of the nurse predominate over all other feelings, however engrossing, and Helen was essentially a woman in the most lovable and womanly attributes of her sex. As her ear satisfied her of Jack's salutary slumbers and happy recovery, she blamed herself for suffering any subject in the world to divert her thoughts

from her brother's safety, and for dwelling on her own selfish sorrows, however keen they might be, at such a time. She forced herself to allow that she ought to be contented, cheerful, even happy. Had she not saved Walter from dishonour (though she shuddered to think at what a price)? and was not Jack rescued to-day almost out of the jaws of death? Oh! if this blessed sleep would only last, she would have both her brothers to live for; and it mattered little then what became of *her*!

She composed herself sufficiently ere long to write to Uncle Archie; and it speaks well for her unselfish nature, and habitual consideration for the feelings of others, that she worded her note pleasantly and cheerfully, as if she was the lightest-hearted damsel in the world.

The envelope was hardly addressed ere she was startled by one of those alarming double knocks that seem to shake a small London house to its very foundations, and are inflicted by great people's footmen, as though in indignant protest that such humble tenement should presume to have a door at all. The maid, ascending all begrimed from her work below, answered the summons with unexpected alacrity, but must have been surprised

at the unusual proceeding which instantly followed her admission that Miss Prince was at home.

Instead of the orderly entrance customary with the aristocracy in the height of the London season, a beautiful young lady, beautifully dressed, descended from a remarkably well-appointed barouche, with a rough terrier in her arms, to proceed, decorously enough, into the house. No sooner, however, had her feet touched the pavement, than the dog, struggling violently from her hold, dropped head and tail in a horizontal line, to scour through the open door, and up the opposite staircase as hard as he could lay legs to the ground. The young lady followed almost as rapidly, leaving the stately footman in his six feet of helpless magnificence to exchange with the dingy, little maid-of-all-work vacant looks of astonishment and dismay.

Thy had not the least recovered themselves before the dog reached the top of the stairs, and bouncing with both fore-feet against the door that opposed him, so violently as to burst it open, leapt with a yell of delight to Jack Brooke's neck at a bound, licking his face, hands, hair, whiskers, in an outburst of affection, all the more true and

touching that it wanted the power of speech to give it vent.

Jack woke up with a start, to find his favourite in his arms. He thought it was a dream—he was *sure* it was a dream, when he opened his eyes wide, and looked towards the door.

Lady Julia Treadwell could run up-stairs as fast as most people, and was not likely to lose her recent purchase for want of a little activity and speed of foot. She darted after Tatters, determined that he should not escape; and the ardour of the chase brought her point-blank into the room where Jack Brooke lay, pale, bandaged, dishevelled, but looking very handsome nevertheless, while he returned the caresses of his dog on the sofa.

Lady Julia, for once in her life, was fairly taken aback. That she had not been thinking of the gentleman on whose solitude she thus intruded during the last ten minutes, I will not venture to affirm; but if so, she had pictured him to herself walking over the farm at home in leather gaiters, perhaps standing at a well-remembered spot in the green lane, looking wistfully towards Tollesdale, and wishing—well, wishing the London season

was over, and she herself had begun her country rides again.

It *was* startling, then, to bounce in on him, here of all places in the world, apparently in his bedroom, or the next thing to it, in such deshabelle too ; and, good heavens ! those bandages ! What could have happened ? Surely not seriously hurt !

For once, I say, she was really taken aback, and this worldly young lady, who prided herself above all things on an external composure and good breeding that no untoward combination could affect, blushed scarlet to the roots of her chestnut hair, and stood stock-still, open-mouthed, looking as awkward as a milkmaid. Soon, however, all thoughts of self merged in anxiety for his welfare, and she turned quite pale again, though she walked quietly up to his sofa, and placing one hand on his shoulder, while he took the other as reverently as if it had been some saintly relic, prevented the effort he was making to get up and bid her welcome.

Tatters in the meantime jumped down, barked, scoured round the room, and jumped on the sofa once more.

"What is it, Mr. Brooke?" she asked, in a low, eager, broken voice. "Why are you here? What is the matter? Don't be afraid to tell me. Is it anything really serious?"

Jack was in the seventh heaven, like a Moslem who has fallen asleep to clash of scimitar and clang of atabal in battle, to be woke by the wave of his love's green scarf in paradise. He was yet half afraid he must be dreaming still.

"Serious!" he repeated, with a smile. "Not a bit of it! Only a common crack on the head: I've had many a worse out hunting. The doctor—who makes the most of it, of course—says I shall be all right in a day or two. How good of you, though, to come and see me."

"I didn't come to see you, Mr. Brooke," replied her ladyship, and here she coloured up a good deal once more. "Miss Prince, my old governess, lives in this house, and I often pay her a visit." Then, tempering a little the cold water she had just dashed over him, she added tenderly, "*I hope* it is as you say. I trust you may not be dangerously hurt. Oh! Mr. Brooke, I know you are too rash, too foolhardy. Tell me all about it: I *must* know, I *insist* on knowing, how it happened!"

Jack had not yet coolly reviewed the proceedings of the previous day for himself. As the circumstances rose before him, one by one, he felt how inappropriate they were for narration to such a person, at such a time, and in such a place. He could no more prevaricate than he could tell a direct lie, so he thought it better to refuse her the information she required point-blank. Also, the train of thought thus originated associated itself necessarily with Walter, and something went through him like a knife, while he remembered how often he had suspected, and with what apparent reason, that the interest Lady Julia showed in himself was but for Walter's sake, after all ; so his voice was a good deal colder, and his manner more reserved, while he replied—

“The whole origin of the accident was of a nature that could not possibly interest you or any other lady. Men are always getting into scrapes, you know, and are lucky when they get out of them with no more damage than a crack on the crown. Mine is really almost well. I hope to be back at Bridlemere to-morrow. We Brookes, you know, Lady Julia, have got very hard heads!”

“And hard hearts too!” thought Lady Julia,

though she was careful, you may be sure, not to say so. She only smiled a little scornfully, and observed, with something of impatience, and even irritation, in her tone—

“You haven’t thanked me for bringing back your dog! I dare say you never missed him, poor little fellow! I suppose you’re like the rest of the world. It’s ‘out of sight, out of mind’ with you too!”

Jack looked up from the sofa, rather reproachfully. There was no mistaking the inflection of her voice, the hardness and constraint of her manner. What had he done now, he thought, to have created this little ebullition of pique, or anger, or dislike, or whatever it might be; and why should she vent it upon him to-day, of all days, when she had him lying helpless, prostrate literally at her feet? A man may be thoroughly ignorant of women and their ways, without being an utter fool; and while Jack looked at his pretty visitor, and marked her shifting colour, her restless gestures, her obvious uneasiness and discomposure, something more than a suspicion of the truth, seemed to shoot through his whole being, causing the blood to dance in his veins, with a

thrill that was extremely bad for his broken head, and by no means conducive to the regular action of his heart.

“How can I ever thank you enough?” he answered, fervently, “whether you brought my dog here, or my dog brought *you*. I always valued Tatters as much as he deserved (there’s not such a terrier of his weight in Europe!), but I have prized him still more since—since the last month or two, and I shall like him still better than ever now!”

It was a very lame confession—not the least an explicit avowal; but Lady Julia knew her man, and it gave her courage to continue in the same strain as before.

“If it hadn’t been for me, you would never have seen him again. A dreadful dog-stealing man was carrying him about in the Park. I knew him directly, and only think, Mr. Brooke! the darling knew *me*! So I bought him immediately, and took him home, and gave him some dinner—too much, I’m afraid, for he made himself sick—and brought him here, because I wouldn’t let him out of my sight till I could send him safe back to Bridlemere.”

No voice—not even the first loved voice of his childhood, he remembered quite distinctly still, had ever sounded so sweet in Jack Brooke's ears; no face had ever looked so fair to his eyes as that which hovered about him now, framed in a delicate, transparent little bonnet, with its light-green trimming. He could have fallen down and worshipped her. At least he would have liked to tell her he could. But the words wouldn't come. He wasn't brave enough. All he did say was this—

“I hope he did not give you much trouble? Did you get him to follow you pretty well?”

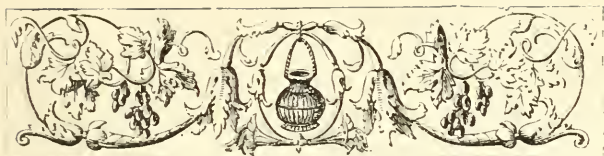
Her voice trembled a good deal now, and her ladyship was rapidly losing her self-command while she answered this very uninteresting question.

“He followed me well enough when I took him home, and seemed to have grown quite fond of me in the carriage, till I brought him to this door. Then he broke away altogether, and rushed up here, and I ran after him, or I should not have intruded, Mr. Brooke, in this uncereemonious kind of way. I ought to beg pardon, I suppose, for my rudeness. He's a faithful little dog, poor

Tatters. I *must* say he seems quite happy to have got back to his master. He won't look at me now, and I don't believe he cares for me *either*, one bit!"

She was close to the sofa by this time, and its occupant had taken hold of her hand. I am not sure but that he was pressing it to his lips; and though she looked very happy, the tears were gathering in her eyes. At this juncture Miss Prince opened the door, having heard that her pupil had arrived, wondering, perhaps, whether she could have found her way to the front drawing-room by mistake. The governess, though I am bound to admit she was more shocked than surprised, started violently when she caught sight of the pair, and retired forthwith.

As their subsequent proceedings could have been of interest only to the performers themselves, perhaps we had better follow the example of Miss Prince.



CHAPTER X.

THE REASON WHY.

QLD Dame Batters, suffering more than ever from rheumatism, notwithstanding the fine spring weather, already brightening into summer, had taken to sunning herself at her cottage door of late, creeping about it for hours together, and looking earnestly up and down the green lane, as though in expectation of a guest. For one guest indeed, the guest whose footstep falls unbidden alike at pauper's hovel and at chieftain's hold, she had been long prepared. She was "near her time," she said, "ready and willin'; but she prayed to see her Jem once afore she did depart. Ah! prayed for it, night an' mornin', she did, and so she should! *She* knowed Jem

couldn't a got to heaven afore his poor old mother. He'd be strange, too, and dashed like, even if he had! No; she'd see Jem, some odd time, walkin' down the lane with his hands in his pockets, an' arter that she'd goo. She wouldn't want to stop long then—not she! there!"

And so, shading her eyes from the afternoon sun, just as he had fancied many a time in her absence, Jem saw his mother once more, as he plodded up the green lane from Middlesworth Station, having travelled from London, third class, with money in his pocket furnished by Philip Stoney, and a resolution to lead a sober and honest life for the future, aroused by the arguments, exhortations, and even entreaties of the same individual. Philip's influence had indeed been always beneficial to this poor reckless vagabond, and his kindness, as will presently appear, was destined to be repaid a hundred-fold.

The meeting between mother and son was so quiet and undemonstrative that a looker-on would hardly have believed it a surprise. She patted him on the shoulders indeed, and the tears came thick and fast to her dim old eyes; but her

voice was very low and broken, while she sobbed out, almost in the words of Scripture, "My boy! my boy! thee hast been dead, an' art alive agin."

Jem said very little, but he too dashed something from his eyes with his dirty hand; and when she had got him fairly within doors, and at the old chimney corner, with his pipe, he observed huskily—

"I'll nivir leave of ye now, mother—not till you leave of me. I've not bin a good son—far from it. But I tell 'ee, mother, I've seen ye most days, in London an' elsewheres, a-settin' theer in that corner, just as I see ye now!"

Then the poor old woman wept aloud for joy, sobbing and rocking to and fro, as though she were in pain.

It was not long, however, before she composed herself, and proceeded to inaugurate a feast in honour of the occasion. Though it might have been about half-past two p. m., she soon had a little black tea-pot out of the cupboard, and prepared about a pint of very doubtful tea, without milk or sugar. Over this favourite refreshment, keeping always between him and the door, as

though fearful he might give her the slip once more, she related at great length the gossip of the village, and last news round Bridlemere. Put into a less diffuse form, its substance amounted to this: that old Halfcock, the keeper, had had "words" with the Squire about the game, and talked of giving up his place; that Sue Stanion was married, and Cissy Brown wanted to be; that the new curate had given Mother Barefoot a pair of shoes, who had pawned them, and been found drunk under a hedge next day; that Mr. Marks had got the first prize at Middlesworth Show for a yearling bull, and the Tollesdale bailiff only taken the second; that the family were to be home next month, and great rejoicings were to take place, both there and at Bridlemere, on the marriage of our young Squire with their young lady; that she (the dame) had herself seen Lady Julia, and thought her not to be compared to their own Miss Helen, and that the latter came to the cottage most days, looking strange, poor dear, and pale—she 'as used to have such a colour with her walk, and that Master Walter was away for good and all, but they couldn't make out whether he was coming to

his brother's wedding or no, and some said as he wanted to get the young lady for hi-self; lastly, that the dark gentleman, him as used to come after Miss Brooke, you know, hadn't been seen about Bridlemere since Sir Archibald came down, and she (Dame Batters), who had been young herself, opined that was the reason as the dear took on so, and looked so pale and peakin' with it all!

Whereupon Jem, who seemed to have learned discretion in his ups and downs, smiled quietly, as one who knows better, but thought well to keep his superior information to himself. He had reasons of his own for connecting Sir Archibald's present sojourn at Bridlemere with Mr. Multiple's disappearance, and did not himself consider the absence of this gentleman a loss to any one concerned. It was improbable the two would meet again on the same terms as formerly, after a certain interview in London in the private room of a club to which they both belonged, that began indeed with something of a hostile tendency, but concluded in the unconditional surrender of one of the belligerents.

Sir Archibald's first care, when he received

Helen's note, was, as usual, to place himself at his niece's disposal, and he arrived at Miss Prince's door, just as Lady Julia Treadwell drove away from it in the new character of an affianced damsel. He discovered Jack in a state of extreme discomposure, caused by overwhelming happiness, which the old soldier attributed to lightness of head rather than heart, the result of his contusions. Finding him unusually incoherent, Uncle Archie had recourse to Helen, and was distressed to observe by her countenance that she, too, had been suffering from emotion, though of a different nature. His kindness and sympathy ere long elicited from poor Helen a burst of sorrow, in which the story of her engagement escaped her almost involuntarily, though even to Uncle Archie she would not disclose her knowledge of Walter's dishonour, nor the bargain by which her contract with Mr. Multiple had been ratified.

Neither was he disposed to breathe in mortal ears the suspicions which, notwithstanding De Rolle's generosity, he had conceived, so that the two were for the first time in their lives at cross-purposes, fencing and concealing from each other

that which was uppermost in the thoughts of both.

At last Sir Archibald took his niece's hands in his, and said very quietly—

“You do not love this man, Helen, and yet you are determined to marry him?”

“Honour! Uncle Archie,” replied pale Helen, trying to smile. “I will not bear to hear him spoken ill of, because I am to be his wife. I have promised, and I mean to keep my word!”

“But, supposing he should give you up?” replied the other—“supposing he should write to you with his own hand, absolving you from your obligations to him, how would it be then?”

Helen blushed; the idea of liberty was indeed more than sweet, but there was, nevertheless, something of pride and pique in the tones with which she answered—

“If such a humiliation were possible, Uncle Archie, of course, a lady does not hold a gentleman to the fulfilment of his bargain.”

Sir Archibald contested the point no longer; but after another interview with Pounder and Jem Batters, followed by a long consultation with an old Crimean friend, wrote a note to Mr.

Multiple, in which he requested an immediate meeting without witnesses, on business of a private and delicate nature. The old soldier had long since learned that men are never so impracticable as when ranged two and two on each side.

Multiple was ere this pretty well convinced that, to use his own language, "the game was up." Still he had read Helen's character aright, and knew that if he had a chance left it was in her scrupulous sense of honour, and undeviating fidelity to a promise she had once made.

It was his nature to carry an unblushing front, and he met Sir Archibald now with a cheerful manner and a cordial smile, though he was careful not to assume a false position by offering his hand.

"This is an awkward business," said he, frankly. "An awkward business, Sir Archibald, and I cannot sufficiently regret the share my partner has had in it. Though at first sight it looks strange, perhaps it is fortunate, after all, that I am about to become connected with the family through your charming niece."

Sir Archibald winced, but preserving his outward composure, observed gravely :

“Mr. Multiple, I have a proposal to make to you.”

The other smiled, and offered him a chair, which, however, was declined.

“My proposal to you, sir, is this—that you shall sit down at that table and write out a formal renunciation of any claim you may have extorted on false pretences from Miss Helen Brooke.”

It was a large morsel to swallow. Multiple thought his adversary’s position must be very strong, or he never would have made so confident an advance.

“And the alternative?” said he, with a laugh, that was almost good-humoured in its carelessness.

“A general show-up of the whole affair in a court of justice, which would blow you and your whole business to the devil!” answered Sir Archibald, in the quiet tone of a man who knows he has got yet more in reserve.

“And the publication of Mr. Walter Brooke’s peculiar method of doing business,” retorted the other maliciously, “which could hardly escape notice from the Horse Guards, and might afford employment to the Committee of this very Club, of which you know he is a member.”

"You have communicated with your partner, I presume," said Sir Archibald quietly, and Multiple knew perfectly what he meant.

"Will Mr. de Rolle repeat that statement on oath?" asked the latter.

"Will you choose to see Mr. Pounder in the witness-box?" demanded Sir Archibald in turn. "I don't think it would answer either your purpose or mine," added he, in a grave, stern tone, "to make this matter public. Come, come, sir, there is only one course for you to pursue. Sit down and write me the paper I require. In consideration of its immediate receipt, I pledge myself to refrain from taking any further steps; and although I will trouble you never to speak to me when we meet, I will carry my hostility no further, and I never wish to enter upon this or any other subject with you again."

There was nothing else for it, and Multiple found himself constrained to comply. He could not face a public inquiry, as Sir Archibald well knew, and although the loss of such an advantageous alliance as he had proposed himself was a sad blow and discouragement, anything was better than the complete ruin, both pecuniary and commercial,

that revelations, extorted on oath, as to his present affairs would too surely entail. Neither did he quite fancy provoking the personal hostility of Helen's quiet, resolute, and adventurous partisan. Sir Archibald, well satisfied, received the required paper with a bow, and walked out of the room, saluting his late friend, whom he had forbidden ever to speak to him again, with as much courtesy as if they had settled their difference with less legal weapons than those of moral pressure and moral force.

He had saved Helen, that was his great consolation under the new trial which now awaited him in an interview with Walter.

Himself the soul of honour, it is needless to say that Sir Archibald would rather have lost all he possessed in the world, than that his brother's son should have been guilty of the deed which, in spite of De Rolle's generous mis-statement, he felt Walter had committed. The old soldier shuddered and sickened at the very thought. Nevertheless, the thing was done; there was no undoing it, and the only palliative left was the promptest reparation, short of public exposure, that could be made to society.

Sir Archibald's better self told him, indeed, that without full confession, there could be no complete atonement for a wrong; but he was an erring human creature after all, and he *could* not, strive as he would, bring himself to forego, on his nephew's behalf, even the shadow of that worldly honour, which is to such men as the very breath of their nostrils. He had been accustomed from childhood to identify the name of Brooke with all that was chivalrous, high-souled, generous, *sans peur et sans reproche*. It is not too much to say that he would have given his life rather than this thing should have happened, to blur with a breath of shame the brightness of his fair ancestral shield.

He took Helen down with him to Bridlemere, and the girl, on whose mind a new, vague sense of happiness was stealing, which she felt to be exquisitely delightful and not altogether unreasonable, thought she had never known her uncle so silent and pre-occupied. He would not even enter the house, but drove off at once to Middlesworth Barracks, where he was fortunate enough to find Walter alone in his quarters, being indeed the subaltern on duty for the day.

Of their interview it is needless to give the par-

ticulars. Each perfectly understood the other, and the full confession that had been staved off by the generosity of Rags, was neither offered nor required. It is enough to say that when Sir Archibald returned the salute of the smart light dragoon, on sentry at the gate, he was a poorer man by a good many hundreds than when he entered the barracks, and Walter was entirely freed from the debts and liabilities he had incurred, during the last few years, with such industry and perseverance.

One *proviso* was made, however, on which the old officer proved inexorable. Walter must leave the army. He should serve her Majesty no longer. Sir Archibald would give no reason for this decision; but he had been a soldier for forty years, and entertained his own high and stringent notions of military honour. In any other career, at home or abroad, he promised to assist him to the utmost of his abilities, but his nephew's papers must go in immediately. He would take no denial about that. So every man in the regiment, except Rags, was surprised when Cornet Anastasius Green became Lieutenant, *vice* Walter Geoffrey Brooke, who retired.

Helen and her uncle grew more inseparable

than ever at Bridlemere. The Squire was better in bodily health, though his mind failed rapidly, and it was with some difficulty that he could be brought to understand his eldest son's marriage. I imagine the family man of business had a tiresome task in arranging the necessary settlements, which could only be made by his consent. Jack, with his brown locks cut away for a good four inches along his hard, serviceable head, was naturally almost always at Tollesdale. By Lady Julia's express desire, they were to be married in the country, and Lady Waywarden had actually consented to forego one half of a London season, in order, to use her own words, "that she might see the last of her child before she lost her for good." Wonderful to say, she took Jack into high favour, and found out that she had always liked him exceedingly." "So well-principled, my dear," she told her friends, "and in every respect so superior to his brother, the good-looking one." His lordship, I think, entertained a secret predilection for his old favourite still. He was very stanch in his friendships, and he knew Walter so much the best of the two. Nevertheless, day by day he found something more to admire and

respect in his future son-in-law, and it was delightful to have a companion every night after dinner, who could enter *con amore* into his doings at the *fama*, and knew more about "top-dressing" than his pompous old bailiff himself.

Viscount Nethersole approved highly of the whole proceeding, inasmuch as the marriage was to bring him home from Eton in the middle of the half. It is to be presumed that he would have welcomed the Great Mogul into the family, with exceeding cordiality, on the same terms.

Lady Julia grew softer and quieter day by day. She even left off talking slang, except on occasions of great excitement, or when she wanted to make Jack laugh. She was very happy, as young ladies sometimes can be, even when they have got all they want in the world. Tatters, also, was more petted and made of than dogs usually are, although they may have successfully performed the office of go-between. He wore a light green ribbon round his neck now, of which I think he entirely disapproved, and besides being dusty, weary and foot-sore, was generally in a state of quenchless thirst and disgust. You see, Jack had, with great propriety, presented him as a gift to his ladye

love, and the consequence was that Tatters, whenever he missed his master from Tollesdale, was off like a shot, and did the whole distance to Bridlemere, under a scorching sun, at a gallop, returning with the same expedition if he found his search fruitless, so that the poor little dog was constantly arriving at either place with his tongue out, in the last stage of exhaustion.

Somebody, however, or something must usually go to the wall when a couple are about to be married, and in this, as in many other cases, the canine devotion and fidelity suffered in silence, and abated nothing of its affection or its truth. The sun shone very bright, which added to the discomfort of poor Tatters during the few weeks in which Lady Julia was getting a *trousseau* that, I cannot but agree with Lord Waywarden, seemed of unnecessary splendour and profusion. It was thirsty weather in and about Middlesworth, and beer was consumed in larger quantities than usual. At this critical moment Mr. Marsh, the brewer in Stingo Street, died of a natural complaint called old age, and his business went a begging for a purchaser. It rejoiced the hearts of many an old friend in and about the town to learn that Stoney

Brothers had bought it of the executors, and nobody was more pleased with this arrangement than Miss Prince, though she lost her principal lodgers thereby, whom, indeed, she had less occasion to regret, having sold her house in Short Street very advantageously, to a patient of Doctor Blair's, and, if I am rightly informed, invested the proceeds of her sale in this very concern.

Where the rest of the money came from, served as a topic of conversation for every gossip in Middlesworth, a large percentage of the population. Surmises, exceedingly far-fetched and extravagant, obtained universal credence. The least improbable was, perhaps, the following. That Mrs. George Stoney had been left a round sum of money by this very Mr. Marsh, who though her maternal great-uncle, had never taken the slightest notice of her during his life, and that a larger sum, varying with the imaginative powers of the narrator, had been advanced at considerable risk by some personal and devoted friend.

Certain it is that Mr. and Mrs. George Stoney, accompanied by Dot and Jane, and the usual complement of children, returned to Middlesworth and occupied extremely uncomfortable lodgings, with

the avowed intention of re-entering their old home when the term for which they had let it should have expired.

Philip also, who had never lost his energies, now recovered much of his former good spirits and bright looks. He was very busy indeed, and scarcely gave himself a moment's respite from his toils. Amongst many other avocations, he was constantly engaged with a series of experiments bearing on the production of beer, and originating in certain discoveries made by him amongst the ruins of the brewery, as to the effects of fire. Should his chemical theories turn out one-half so successful as he expects, that catastrophe, originating in Jem Batters's drunkenness, will have proved, with one exception, the most fortunate event of his life.

This exception has been owing also to the influence of the thoughtless vagabond whom he has striven so long and patiently to extricate from the Slough of Despond, out of which a drunkard never emerges unassisted.

Had Jem not been an eye-witness to the assault on Jack Brooke, it is probable that Helen's engagement to Mr. Multiple would have been ful-

filled. If such had been the case, I think Philip Stoney would never have returned to Middlesworth. I think Helen herself would have looked very different that bright June morning on which I am about to take leave of her at Bridlemere.

It is still sunny, glowing midsummer weather, with a scent of hay, and a quiver of heat, and a hum of insects in the air. The massive trees are black in their deep luxuriance of foliage, and the very birds are hushed and silent in the shade. The deer have buried themselves in distant glades, couching amongst the fern and foxglove in Dingle-side at the farther end of the park, and the few cattle visible from the house windows are standing knee-deep in a gleam of water between the woods, tossing their wide-horned heads at lazy intervals, but loth to mar their indolent enjoyment by so much as the movement of a limb. Roses are blooming bright and fragrant in Helen's garden, and not a petal has yet been strewn by the sleeping breeze on its level shaven sward. A brace of white butterflies are flitting to and fro against the blue sky, and a puff of smoke is curling upward in thin, spiral wreaths. Save for these, everything seems basking, quiet and motionless; even the

figure from which the smoke is rising reclines at ease in a well-sloped, comfortable garden-chair.

Nine o'clock breakfast is over. The Squire has been wheeled off to his library as usual. Jack, released from duty at the farm, in consideration of his approaching nuptials, has departed, on a half-broken three-year-old, for Tollesdale; and Sir Archibald, who is sadly addicted to tobacco, has lit his after-breakfast cigar, and settled himself for a luxurious smoke under the shade of the lime-trees in Helen's garden.

Presently, a white dress comes dazzling out upon the hot gravel-walk beneath the breakfast-room window, and Miss Brooke, with her black hair shining like jet in the sun, crosses the lawn, humming a tune and gathering a rose as she passes on, workbox in hand, to take a seat by Uncle Archie for an hour of happy, quiet talk, which they both prize as one of the chief enjoyments in the day. The Squire sleeps away most of his time now, and Helen's duties are less onerous, if they are more indispensable, than heretofore.

She looks brilliant this fine summer's morning, with her fresh toilet, her raven hair, and her sweet

white brow, from which the load of care seems of late completely removed. Sir Archibald's heart stirs within him ; it is so like the face of thirty years ago ; the face that has never faded in his memory, that pervades, even to-day, the glowing landscape, the sleeping woods, the earth, the air—above all, the blue, distant heaven, whence he can almost fancy she is looking down upon him still.

Helen makes a little affected grimace of disgust at his cigar, though amongst ladies she professes to “like the smell of them above all things in the open air,” as indeed she would of asafoetida if that happened to be Uncle Archie's favourite perfume ; but this is a nice little opportunity to tyrannize over him, so she takes it out of his mouth in her taper fingers, and makes as if she would throw it away.

“Jack has given up the vile practice,” says she, “even though Julia declares she delights in it. Uncle Archie, why don't *you* ?”

“I'm not going to be married, Helen, am I ? At least, I hope not,” answered her uncle, repossessing himself of his narcotic. “Wait till you've a pipe of your own to put out, my dear. Perhaps it won't be long first, after all.”

Helen busies herself in tying up a standard rose tree, already sufficiently well secured, and the exertion no doubt brings a very bright colour to her delicate cheek. She abandons the tobacco question forthwith, and Sir Archibald smiles slyly, as old gentlemen will when they take unfair advantage of young ladies by the *argumentum ad hominem*.

“Jack is a sad martyr,” continues Sir Archibald. “It must be a very laborious business, this making love, Helen. Don’t you think so? Almost as bad as making hay this broiling weather. There’s Jack, started off directly he’d swallowed his breakfast, under this tropical sun; and if the young horse consents to take him there, which is doubtful, he’ll be at Tollesdale all day. He’ll have a walk and talk with Lady Julia, luncheon with Lady Julia, and a drive with Lady Julia; tea with the same person; dinner as near her as the process of feeding will permit; perhaps another walk and talk by moonlight with Lady Julia to finish up. What *can* they find to talk about? and how tired poor Jack will be when he comes home!”

“Tired!” repeated Helen, indignantly. “I

don't think Jack and Julia could ever be tired of one another. Besides, Uncle Archie, you know they must have such a quantity of things to settle. How nice it will be, when they come to stay with us here for the rest of their lives! I think we're all of us a great deal happier than we deserve!"

While she spoke it was strange how the same expression seemed to pervade those two faces; how like the war-worn old man and the fresh young girl were to each other, for a few moments, ere it passed away. It left his features first, perhaps because the feeling that produced it was even deeper and holier in his heart than hers. Then he smoked for a while in silence ere he asked maliciously—"Will it be too hot for a ride to-day, Helen? Why shouldn't we canter over to Tollesdale in the afternoon and ask Lady Waywarden for some tea? Then we might all come back together, and indeed it would be a charity to poor Nethersole, who has confided to me that his sister's engagement, which he expected would be 'awful jolly,' has turned out 'cruelly slow.' What say you, Helen? I've nothing particular to keep me in this afternoon, have *you*?"

Helen coloured again; nearly as red as the rose she had placed in the bosom of her white dress. It was a blush, though, in which there was more of pleasure than of shame. She looked Uncle Archie steadily in the face, notwithstanding that the crimson was rising to her temples. Then the tears gathered in her eyes, though they shone with a thorough heartfelt happiness, while she replied—"I wouldn't go away this afternoon to be made Queen of England, and you know it, Uncle Archie. It's Philip's day, and he works so hard, poor fellow, and waits so patiently; and he would have had no days at all, and I don't know what would have become of him, nor of me neither, if it hadn't been for *you*, you dear, kind, generous, self-willed, tiresome old monster; and I shall never let you go away from me, though you're very provoking sometimes, but love you and tease you, and take care of you all the days of my life!"

Then she ran back into the house, partly to get the newspaper, and partly to hide her tears, for she was crying from sheer happiness; and Sir Archibald, looking into the depth of the blue summer sky, remembered how just such another

figure had left him years before in an agony of shame, and sorrow, and remorse, because her woman's weakness could not resist the pressure laid upon it by friends and family! How, when Helen's mother had passed her word to his elder brother, while avowedly she loved himself, he had sworn, even in the bitterness of his sorrow, that he would deal faithfully, loyally by both, sacrificing his own happiness without a murmur; and how through good and evil he had kept the spirit and the letter of his oath.

“And now,” said Uncle Archie, flinging the end of his cigar into the rose bushes, with his face still turned to heaven—“now I have my reward. When I meet you there I can tell you how I have watched over those you loved on earth, and kept for you the heart you once prized so dearly, as pure and stainless as your own!”

I know not if she heard him. Perhaps the lowest of our whispers may reach eternity, for it is not so far from any of us, after all.

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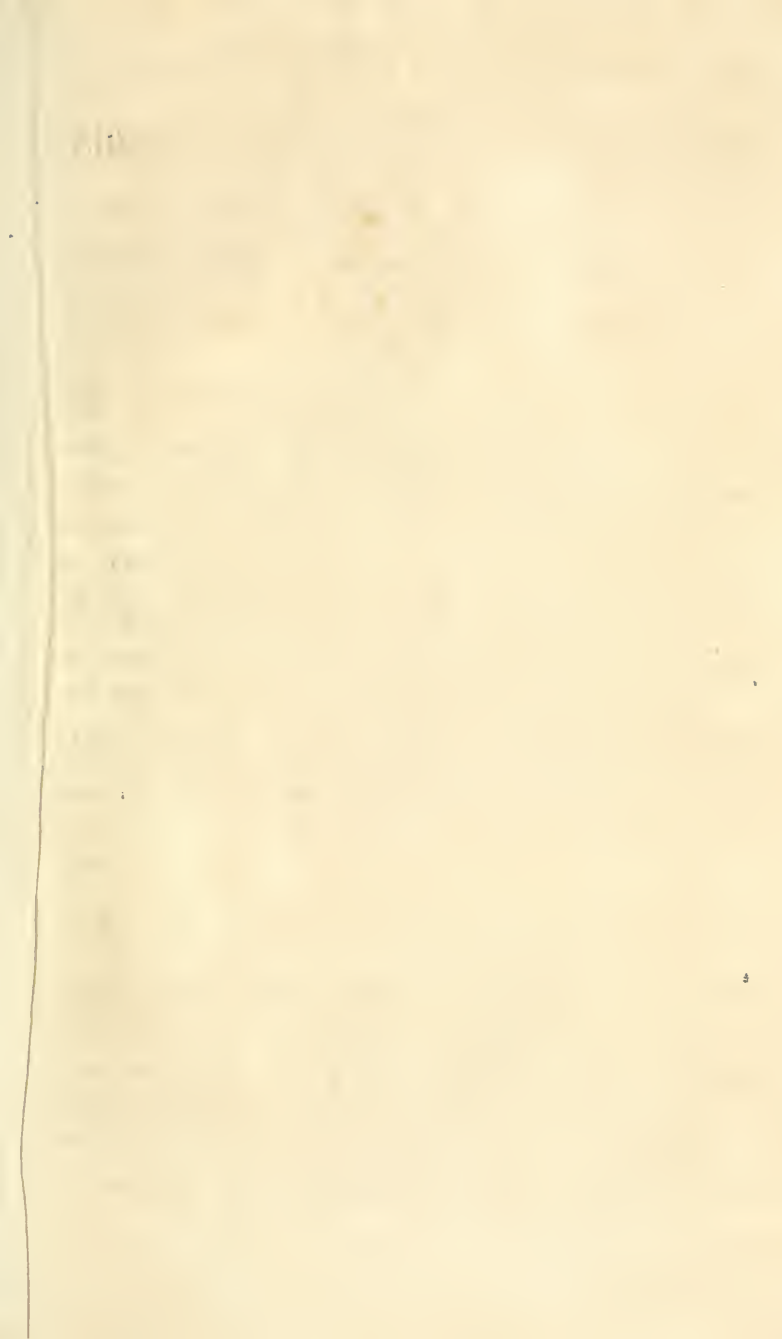
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